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Twice A Month

December 25th

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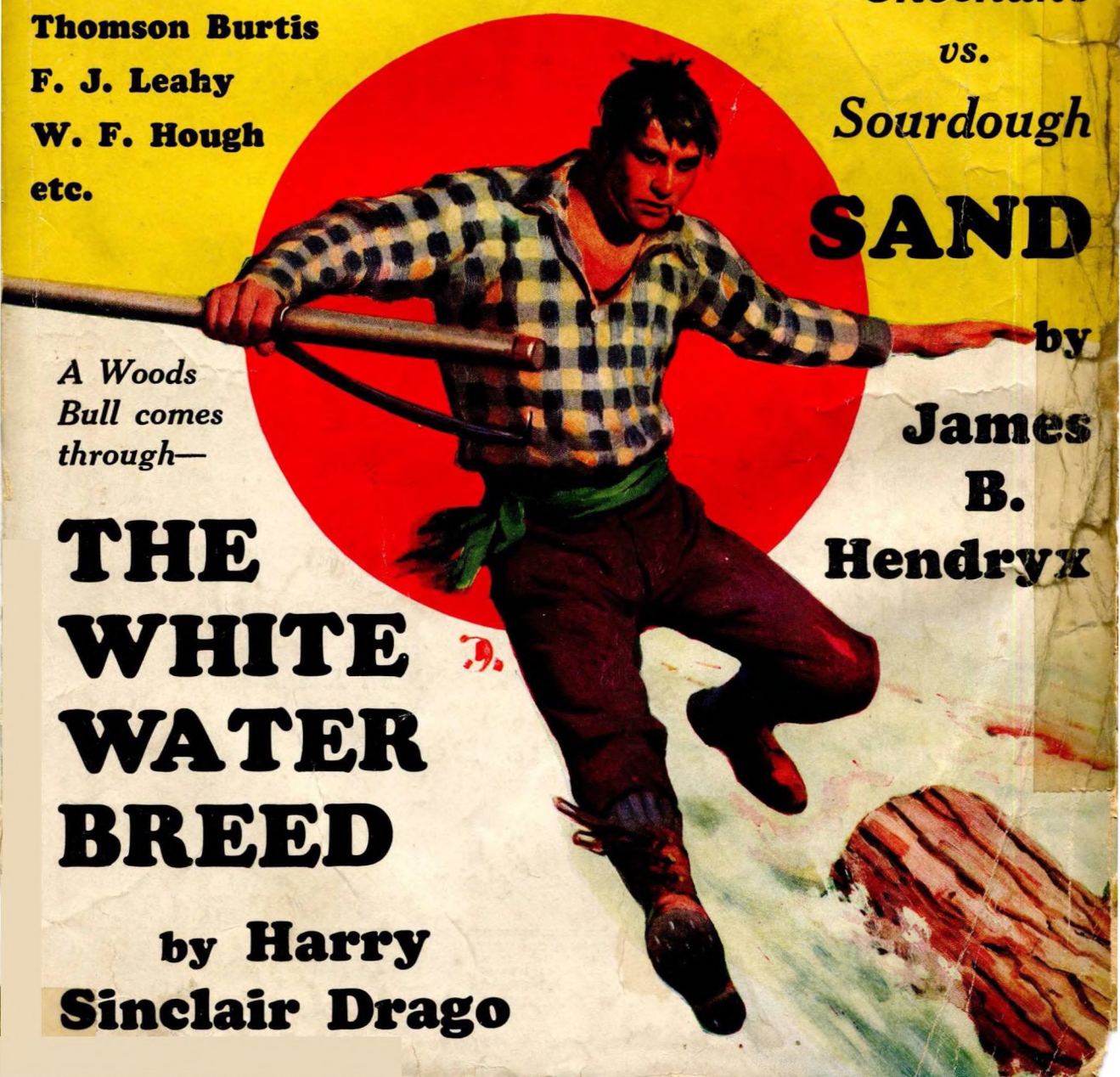
W. F. Hough
etc.

Checkako vs. Sourdough

SAND

by

James B. Hendryx



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THE WHITE WATER BREED

by **Harry Sinclair Drago**

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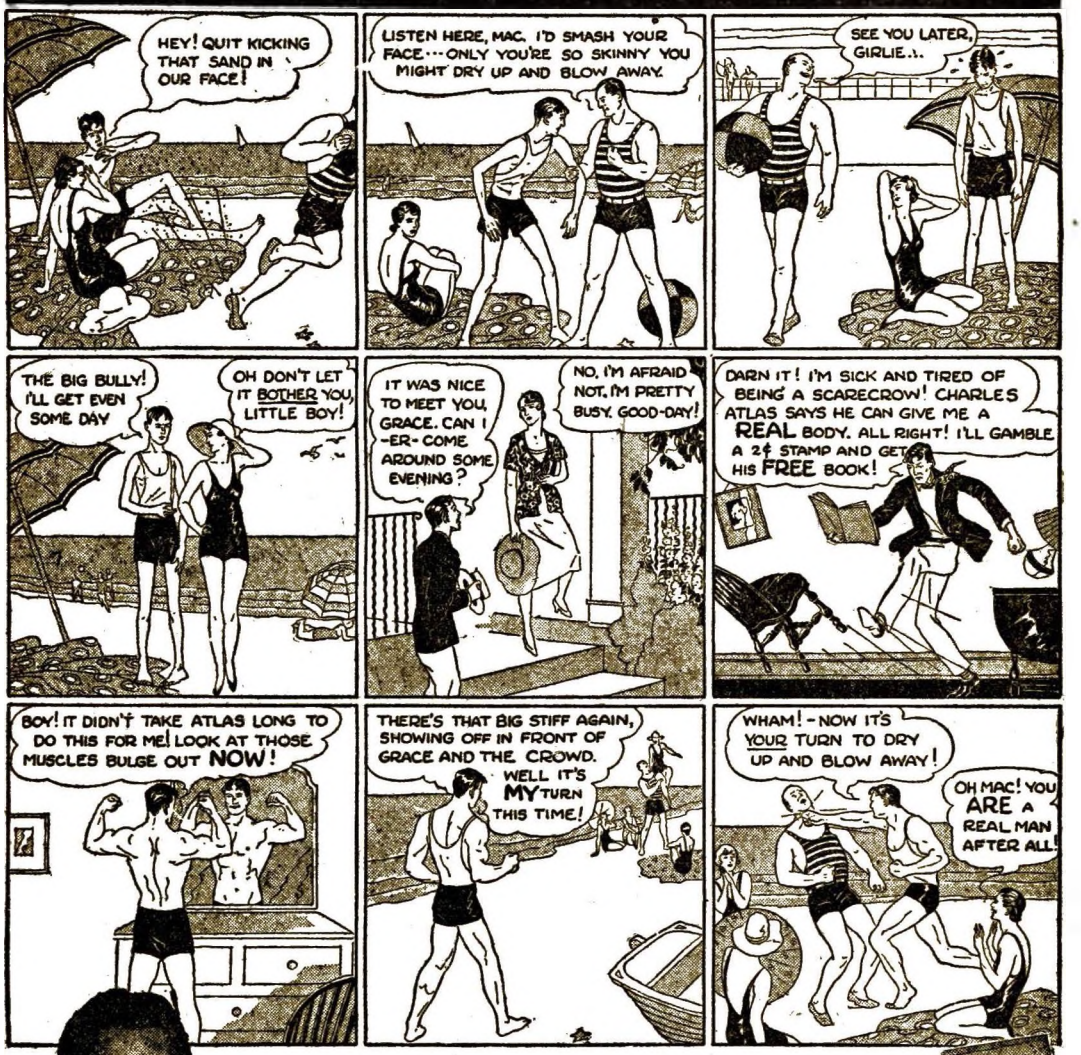
THE INSULT THAT MADE A MAN OUT OF "MAC"


HEY! QUIT KICKING THAT SAND IN OUR FACE!
LISTEN HERE, MAC. I'D SMASH YOUR FACE···ONLY YOU'RE SO SKINNY YOU MIGHT DRY UP AND BLOW AWAY.
SEE YOU LATER, GIRLIE..
THE BIG BULLY! I'LL GET EVEN SOME DAY
OH DON'T LET IT BOTHER YOU, LITTLE BOY!
IT WAS NICE TO MEET YOU, GRACE. CAN I -ER- COME AROUND SOME EVENING?
NO, I'M AFRAID NOT. I'M PRETTY BUSY. GOOD-DAY!
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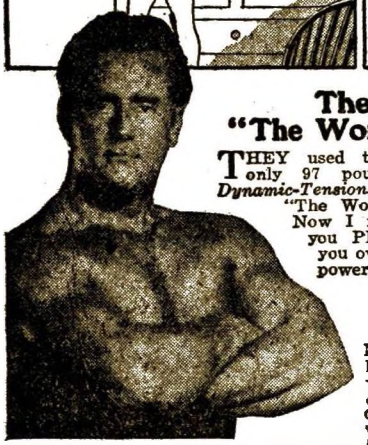
THERE'S THAT BIG STIFF AGAIN, SHOWING OFF IN FRONT OF GRACE AND THE CROWD. WELL IT'S MY TURN THIS TIME!
WHAM! - NOW IT'S YOUR TURN TO DRY UP AND BLOW AWAY!
OH MAC! YOU ARE A REAL MAN AFTER ALL!



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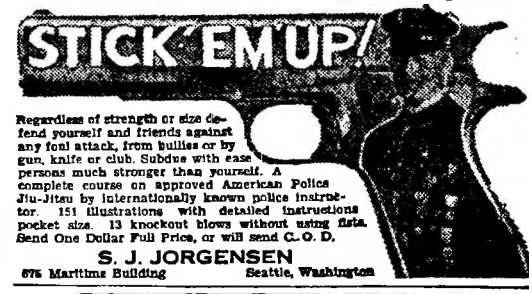

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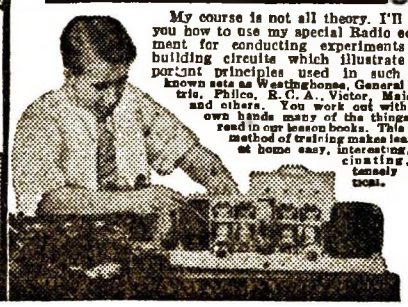

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They laughed right out loud

...when I offered to play

—but a moment later a hush fell over the entire crowd

"LET'S all give my country cousin a great big hand!" cried Helen, dragging me out to the center of the room.

Everyone at the party started to clap. "What's he going to do?" someone called out. "Are we going to be entertained with an exhibition of fancy hog-calling?"

"No—cousin Ned claims that he can play the piano," replied Helen, "but I'm sure he's fibbing. I happen to know that there isn't a piano teacher within miles of his home."

"Just the same I'd like to see if you big-towners can dance as well as you can wise-crack," I retorted not taking any offense.

"For goodness sakes, please don't play 'Turkey In The Straw' . . . . you know this is no barn dance," one of the boys pleaded.

I Let Them Have Their Fun

So they thought I was a "hick"—that folks from the country couldn't learn to play music just as well as people in the city. They thought, too, that they were giving me a great kidding. If they only knew how I had been toying with them right along.

I started to pull out the piano bench and someone started to "moo," "S-h-h-h! —let him have his little joke," said my cousin Helen.

But they kept up the razzing. "Hey there—that's a piano bench not a milk-stool."

"No fooling—and this is a piano, not a writing desk. Honestly, it plays—listen!" And without any preliminaries, I broke into a medley of popular songs. There wasn't a sound in the room. I only wish I could have seen their faces for I knew that I had given them a surprise.

"Keep it up—that's great, Ned," shouted the chap who had been doing most of the riding.

"Yes, please don't stop," begged Helen, "we want to dance."

No second invitation was needed. I played every number that they placed before me. Suddenly they started to pump me with questions.

"Put one over on us, didn't you, Ned?" said Helen. "You're certainly the last person at this party I thought could play. How about letting us in on the secret?"

No Secret

"Have you ever heard of the U. S. School of Music?" I asked.

A few of my friends nodded. "That's a correspondence school, isn't it?" they exclaimed.

"Exactly," I replied. "They have a surprisingly easy method through which you can learn to play any instrument by mail in just a few months without a teacher."

"It doesn't seem possible," someone said.

"That's what I thought, too. But the Free Demonstration lesson which they mailed me on request so opened my eyes that I sent for the complete course.

"It was simply wonderful—no laborious scales—no heartless exercises. My fear of notes disappeared at the very beginning. As the lessons came they got easier and easier. Before I knew it I was playing all the pieces I liked best.

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IN THE NEXT ISSUE

TO CALIFORNIA! *TO THE KLONDIKE!*

Part I

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A mighty novel of the mighty North

by James B. Hendryx

And also

"Barehanded"—*A novelette of*
"The Major" by L. PATRICK GREENE

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by EUSTACE L. ADAMS

etc.

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THE GREATEST AND BEST

Short

TWICE A MONTH

CONTENTS

AROUND THE WORLD WITH SHORT STORIES (Map) 8

GETTIN' AN EDUCATION — **The Editor** 9

THE WHITE WATER BREED (A Complete Novel) — **Harry Sinclair Drago** 10

A Woods Bull bulls it through in the Lake Superior country

SAND — **James B. Hendryx** 44

Beat a Yukon sourdough at his own game?

TOP BOY — **Frank Knox Hockman** 56

Oil as it is gushed in Burma—with an American on the job.

ADVENTURERS ALL — **William P. Schramm** 66

Tiger Bait.

CUCKOO PAPA (A Novelette) — **Thomson Burtis** 68

The dare-devil flyers of the Border Patrol.

HIGH MESA (Conclusion) — **Jackson Gregory** 92

A red-head sees the end of the game of impersonation in the cattle-country.

ADVENTURE MAGAZINE

Stories

HARRY E. MAULE, *EDITOR*

Title Registered in U. S. Patent Office

Dec. 25th, 1932

MYSTERIOUS EASTER ISLAND **M. D. McCarty** **122**

CHERUBS ON THE BEACH **Frank J. Leahy** **123**
Proof positive as done in full colors by a tattoo artist.

PERFORMANCE BY COMMAND
William Freeman Hough **130**
Flying high to catch them broncs.

THE SAXOPHONE SALUTE **Leighton H. Blood** **140**
An American crooner in the ranks of the Foreign Legion.

THE STRONG HENCHMAN (A Novelette) **Kerry Wood** **152**
One man versus the might of the North.

THE STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE **166**

OUTLANDS AND AIRWAYS **170**

ENDS OF THE EARTH CLUB **171**

COVER—Gerard C. Delano

Vol. CXLI, No. 6 Whole No. 648

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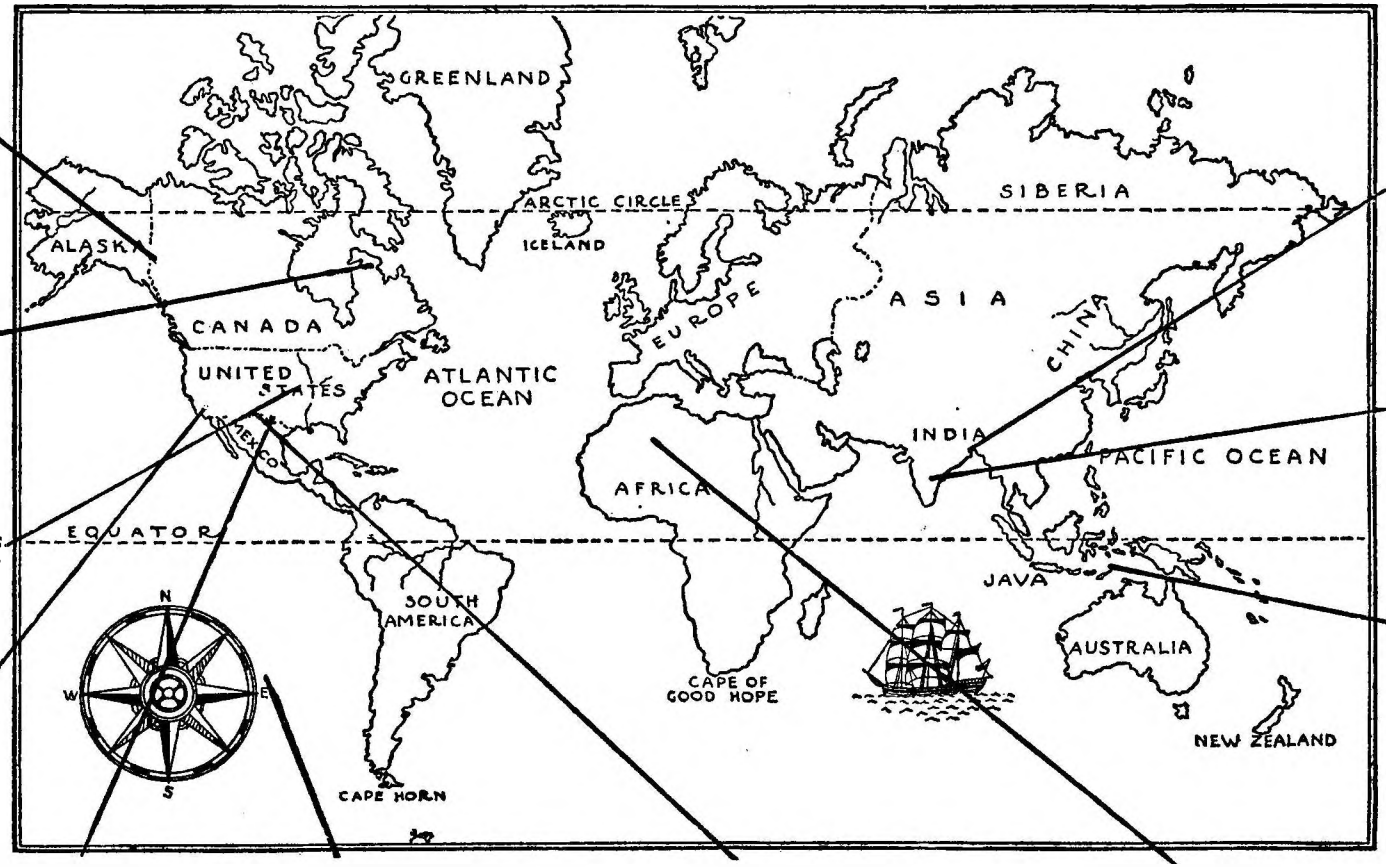
AROUND THE WORLD WITH SHORT STORIES



KLONDIKE
Sand

NORTHLAND
The Strong Henchman

GREAT LAKES
The White Water Breed

WEST
High Mesa

BURMA
Top Boy

INDIA
Tiger Bait

DUTCH EAST INDIES
Cherubs on the Beach

MEXICAN BORDER
Performance by Command

THE OUTERMOST ISLAND
Mysterious Easter Island

THE BORDER PATROL
Cuckoo Papa

FOREIGN LEGION
The Saxophone Salute

TWICE A MONTH

Short Stories

December 25th 1932

GETTIN' AN EDUCATION

WRITING about himself in reply to a question, a contributor, the other day said, "the more formal part of my education was acquired in such-and-such schools and colleges, but I've been getting my real education ever since." That started us looking around at various people with his remark in mind. It was startling to find how many men and women complacently assumed that their educations are complete and are content to go along with just two main ideals in life—pleasure and money. Of course, with times as hard as they are just now, they have to accept certain responsibilities. Men stick to their jobs, learn by experience, plan for better times; women economically manage their households, and bring up their children. Also these days a great many people are helping out families less fortunate than themselves. But do they see these responsibilities as the opportunity for education?

Most of us just meet the day's problems as they come, without plan and without purpose. Necessity forces us to seek money, and nature demands the relaxation of pleasure. So the vicious circle is formed. The result is a man caught in the net of futility.

The one who realizes his predicament, who is driven by a Divine discontent, is on the high road to find a way out. That way, we think, is education. Take any subject that attracts you; your job, your home, your children. Learn something more about it.

You say the times are out of joint, why should you seek further education? Or that you are doing pretty well and the same question applies. Will further education help you to make more money? To be a brilliant talker? To gain a reputation as a scholar? All of these will come, but the big point is to enrich your life with knowledge. Whether you use it or not, education—discipline of mind and heart, the ability to absorb and apply information—is its own reward in satisfaction, in the new vistas for understanding life and all its present-day distracting and ever-pressing problems, that it will open to you.

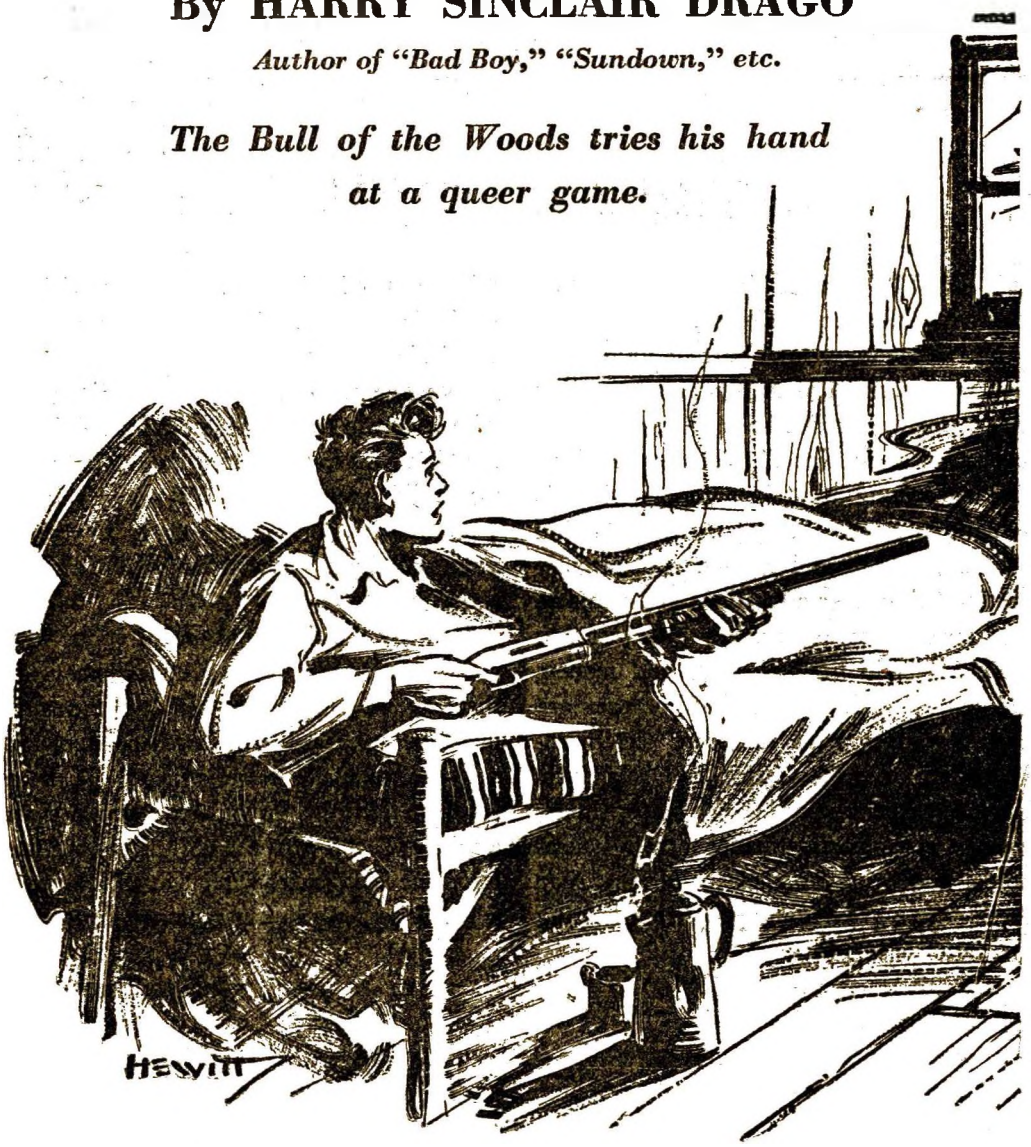
The Editor.

THE WHITE WATER BREED

By HARRY SINCLAIR DRAGO

Author of "Bad Boy," "Sundown," etc.

The Bull of the Woods tries his hand at a queer game.



I

BULL OF THE WOODS

FROM the window of his cell in the Pointe Aux Barques jail Polean La Flamme looked down on the rough, tough little lumber town that had been pushed out on the rocky shores of Lake Superior by the marching ranks of glistening wet scrub spruce and second growth timber that crowded close on the mills and log basins.

April was half gone. It had been raining for days. The saturated woods and earth gave off a smothering silence that put a hollow echo in the distant hallooing of men and hushed the bawling of the noisy Rivière St. Michel, running bank full now, and tempered even the shrill whining

of the big powerfully gleaming saws.

But Polean La Flamme, his face pressed to the bars of his cell window, was hardly aware of sounds so familiar, or of that panorama of dripping greens through which the logging railroad of the Laurier Lumber Company cut slashes over which lazily floated the white smoke that rose in clouds from the tall, screened stacks of the mills. In the street below there was life; noisy, turbulent life that he could appreciate and understand. It lifted him out of himself and fired his imagination; and neither the woods nor the black, sullen lake, pounding the rocky shore in the endless warfare of land and sea, intruded.

The Spring drive was over. Swaggering men had come to town from the lumber shanties and the river—woodsmen, rivermen like himself—with hard cash in

their pockets; there to spend it with a flourish and stand Pointe Aux Barques on its head with the very gusto of their release from hard work and the imprisonment of the woods.

THE drumming of their caulked boots on plank sidewalks rose to his ears together with their cries of greeting, their profanity. He rattled the iron bars, loose in their sockets, in his eagerness to be among them. He thrilled to the thudding of hard fists on lean jaws as last winter's grudges were settled; to the gay, throaty laughter of women with painted lips leaning out of windows, glad, too, that their day had come.

Mechanical pianos banged with tinny discord. Crowds trooped from one gathering place to the next. Men looked up at him, either derisively or with a word of encouragement. And like a mist swimming above a marsh the smell of hard liquor rose to his nostrils and parched his lips with desire.

It was riot; license run wild; men taking a mighty reprisal from life for the back-breaking toil and repression of the long, weary months of winter in the woods, for the dangers of their touch-and-go game with death on the river. These brief two or three days alone made life endurable. Later a man could turn to his nets and the lake, or lose himself with his traps in the mazes of the marshes of Grand Marais.

For months to come this carouse would prove an ever-fresh topic of conversation; something to recall fondly and with pride. Polean La Flamme hung his head in his impotence. He would have no tales of conquest to tell. He whom they called the bull of the woods, with his giant body and hands that could fell an ox, was penned up in a four by six cell, charged with murder. Tomorrow the police would come to take him away to Thomaston to await trial.

Boys gathered in little groups to stare up at him and point accusing fingers.

"See the murderer!" they cried in chorus. "He killed a man!"

Strangely enough their taunting cries won a grim smile from him, for they served to remind him why he found himself in his present predicament. He brushed the shock of touseled hair back from his forehead and laughed. In his eyes there was no light of repentance or fear of the sinister fate which he faced.

If the expression which clouded his brow was one of regret it was only that every fibre of him longed to be free that he might take the position among his fellows to which his brawn and inclinations entitled him. He could have borne with equanimity being cooped up in a dark dungeon, far removed from these scenes of gaiety. Here he was on exhibition, in sight of the feast itself, but unable to catch at even the crumbs of plenty as they fell from the groaning board.

HE LEFT the window and tried to close his eyes and ears to the sights and sounds that drifted up to him. But he could not stay away. Invisible hands drew him back. The rain fell in torrents. No one cared. The hilarity went on. They were singing—songs he knew. At last, unable to resist the temptation to share in some way the merriment of that tipsy throng, he began to sing too, bellowing in a voice to drown out the booming of the lake and the grumbling of the river:

"En roulant ma boule,
Rouli, roulant, ma boule roulant——"

"Brigadier," the American song, "Harry Bale" and "Foreman Monroe"—he knew them all and roared them out with the others, until men paused to look up at him and shake their heads.

"He must be drunk!" said one.

"No, he's mad!" others declared.

By noon the population of Pointe Aux Barques had doubled. The last to arrive were the swampers and teamsters from the big timber at the head of the Rivière St.

Michel—the Grady's and the Hallahans and the O'Days. Blaze Dolan, the murdered man, a hairy bully-boy from the Liverpool docks who had clubbed his way up the ladder to division woods-boss for the Laurier Company, had his partisans among them—men who had hated him heartily alive, but who, under the sway of racial prejudice had come to town with a chip on their shoulder, eager, as Irishmen, to continue their long feud against Johnny Canuck and resent any slur on the dead man's memory.

Some paused to purchase and don new socks before hurling themselves into the mêlée of noise and intoxication. It was a social nicety that failed to appeal to the majority. Four abreast they started down the street, looking for trouble and determined to find it.

THE road curved with the shore line. On one side were the docks and slips used by the lumber barges and the fishing fleet. Across the way was an unbroken row of saloons and stores of one sort or another. In a number of instances, the town-hall in particular, the second floor of which housed the jail, buildings had been erected on the docks themselves, so that business was transacted on both sides of the street.

Next door to the town-hall, allowing for the slip that intervened, stood the building which Duncan Rennick, the magistrate, occupied. The first floor he used as a court-room and offices for conducting his insurance and private banking business. He and his son, Bruce, dwelt in the rooms above.

In summer it was not an unusual sight to see the prow of a lake freighter projecting halfway across the main thoroughfare of Pointe Aux Barques. At this time of the year the slips were empty, and as the men from the St. Michel swung around the curve in the road there was nothing to obstruct their view of Polean La Flamme at his cell window, roaring his ribald songs.

A yell of rage broke from them and they hurried forward, picking up whatever they could to hurl at that grinning face pressed to the bars.

From his doorway, Sam Goriot, the little French Jew who ran the general store, blinked at them through his thick glasses as they trooped by. He was apprehensive rather than annoyed, for he dealt extensively in those articles of food and clothing which a lumberjack can not well do without. He turned to his clerk with great patience.

"Time to put up the shutters, Hormisdas," he said. "The Irish are here."

Suddenly men began to pour out into the streets. Almost to a man they were French. It did not stop the rush of the newcomers. With a wild cry they charged the jail, hurling at the prisoner every missile they had gathered.

Polean La Flamme did not retreat. With his elbows he fended off the things they threw at him. A new light dawned in his eyes as he began to realize that, far from being left out of the scene, he was the very center of it.

A rock cut his forehead. It was a trifling wound, but the blood that soon smeared his face was enough to fire his followers to action.

"Sacrê!" a little man shouted. "Me, I don' stand for that!" It was Remy Ledoux, he whom they called the Rabbit, he was so small.

HE DIDN'T pause to choose his foe but rushed headlong at the nearest one. His fist doubled as he brought it up from his knees. It was a slashing blow that landed just in front of the ear. His adversary was twice his size, but he rocked him. A silly grin creased the man's lips. Remy hit him again, and this time the man went down. It was the signal for a general charge. In another moment a hundred men were trading blows.

Frenchmen who had fought each other earlier in the day now waged battle in a common cause. In patois and their native tongue they cursed their enemies and cried

encouragement to their own kind. The St. Michel men bellowed their hatred and defiance.

To call it a shindy would be a libel. It transcended anything as conventional as that. This was a fight to the finish with nothing barred, not even mayhem. The intention of every man engaged was to maim his enemies as quickly and painfully as possible. It was not only a battle of smashing fists. To butt a man in the stomach, to kick him, to stamp a hob-nailed boot heel into his face, once he was down, was the accepted *coup de grace.*

No one thought of asking for quarter. No one protested the right of two men to jump one. Grunting and groaning they fought on. A red-headed giant from St. Michel picked up Remy Ledoux and hurled him half-way across the street. Before the red-haired one could catch his breath a blow on the jaw felled him.

Through it all Polean Le Flamme screamed his pleasure and beat the bars with his huge fists until his hands were raw. It was a fight to be remembered. Pointe Aux Barques had never seen its equal, neither had he. Could he have taken part in it his cup of happiness would have brimmed over.

The whole town was there to watch. Old Eadras Pelang, Pointe Aux Barques' only police officer, who was also the jailer, limped out upon the steps of the town-hall, leaving the doors unlocked behind him. There was not a man in that fighting mob but could have thrust him aside and had his prisoner. But they were not there to free Polean La Flamme or drag him out to visit their wrath on him. He only symbolized their clashing racial differences of opinion, and both sides were quite willing to let the law take its course with him.

For the better part of an hour they fought it out, moving up and down the street as the advantage swung from one side to the other. The Irish were in the minority, but the most prejudiced observer could not have done worse than call the battle a draw.

Blackened eyes, tattered clothes and cracked heads were eloquent evidence of the ferocity with which both sides had fought. Exhaustion forced a truce at last. They went back to the headquarters carrying their injured with them; the Canadians moving in one direction, the Irish in another.

COMPARATIVE quiet returned to Pointe Aux Barques. Duncan Rennick, the magistrate, who had been watching the mêlée from the doorway of his office, came out on the steps and surveyed the scene of carnage. He was a tall, thin dour-looking man with closely cropped sandy hair, unmistakably a Scot. He was unduly agitated at the moment, and beckoned to old Esdras, the jailer.

"Have that fool La Flamme stop his infernal noise!" he commanded. "He's driving me mad!"

Esdras scratched his head perplexedly.

"But, M'sieu,' how am I to make him stop?" he inquired.

"Threaten to chain him!"

Esdras shivered at the thought. He knew no man in Pointe Aux Barques could put Polean Le Flamme in irons against his will. He turned away shaking his head pessimistically.

"I shall speak to him," he said.

He clumped away, dragging his twisted foot. Once inside, he took his time about climbing the stairs. When he reached the cell door he rattled it gingerly.

"Polean," he said, trying to put into his voice a degree of authority he was far from feeling, "stop this noise! You are in jail. Have some respect for this place."

"Bah, I spit on these place!" was his reply. "She mak' me sick, these jail!"

"It is a first-class jail," Esdras retorted

sharply. "And you will please to be quiet. The magistrate, M. Rennick——"

"O ho! So old money-bags say I mak' too much noise, huh? Bagosh! For twenty year he mak' plentay noise and nobody say not'ing! Now she's my turn!"

Esdras launched a torrent of words at him. His world revolved around Duncan Rennick, a bond that dated back a score of years to the time when Rennick had come out to Fort Reliance as factor and he, Esdras, had been chief trader at the old H. B. Co. post.

"Blame yourself if you are locked up," he concluded. "The law is the law. It is all right for men to fight, but things are bad enough without standing there at the window, singing and yelling like a madman to make them worse. I warn you to be quiet."

The big fellow was about to turn away, unimpressed by the old man's argument, when he paused and his manner changed.

"Esdras, how long Polean La Flamme be here in these place?"

"The Mounted Police will come for you tomorrow."

"So? Hall right, I mak' a bargain wid you. You don lak' dese fight beesness, eh? Well, you let me go for wan hour. I stop these fight. I bus' de pants off dese Irish. When you see dem run you t'ink skunk is after dem. I bus' some head for dem, hall right. By Gar, you can lock me up den and I be so quiet you not t'ink you have even mouse in these jail! What you say, Esdras?"

The old man snorted his disgust.

"Fool, you stay where you are! You have made trouble enough already! But instead of being filled with remorse, you make a holiday of it with your contempt for the law."

Polean La Flamme shook his great head ruefully.

"These law is damn bad beesness for some mens, Esdras. She put me in jail, hall right, but she don' sew hup my mout'! If old Rennick don' lak my noise she can go chase herself. Mebbe these is last good tam' I ever have. And you would take dat away from me, huh? Get out, you old croaker!" he roared. "I laugh in your face!"

He turned back to the window of his cell, his mouth open to give voice to a yell that would have reached the end of the street. The cry died in his throat. The fight seemed to go out of him and he backed away from the barred window and made the sign of the cross.

Esdras raised himself on his toes to peer over his shoulder. He saw a little man in faded black crossing the road below. It was Father Despard, the Curé of Pointe Aux Barques and the St. Michel, the extent of whose parish was determined only by blizzard, fire and flood.

"Thank God!" Esdras exclaimed fervently. "You still have some respect left in you. If not for the law at least for the Church."

The taunt stung the prisoner.

"Get out!" he cried, catching up a rock that had been hurled through the bars. "Go 'for I knock de rus' out of your creakin' joints! *Allez!*"

II

WHEN THE RIVER RAN WHITE

DUNCAN RENNICK had retreated to the privacy of his office the moment he caught his first glimpse of the *Curé*. He was pleased to learn that Father Despard had returned to town from his regular monthly jaunt to Whitefish Bay. Indeed, there was no one in Pointe Aux Barques whom he was more anxious to see. And yet, knowing that in a few minutes the good man would be shaking his hand and asking an explanation of all that had transpired in his absence, he could not decide whether he should confide in him fully or not. The reservation in his mind had nought to do with Polean La Flamme. It concerned his son, Bruce, a boy of eighteen. And it was strange, his hesitancy, seeing that for three days he had anxiously awaited the Curé's return that he might

seek his advice, even though he and Father Despard were of different faiths.

People said Duncan Rennick, with his wintry smile, was a hard man; and yet it was all he could do to compose himself as he heard the door open and Father Despard entered.

"Well, Father," he exclaimed heartily, hoping to hide the fear that was gnawing at him, "I am glad to see you back again!"

The little priest gave him his hand, and the tiny lines about his keen eyes multiplied tenfold as he smiled at his old friend.

"And evidently it is high time I got back," he said, jerking his head over his shoulder in the direction of the recent brawl. "These affairs are so senseless. They are always to be regretted, because they prove nothing." He lowered his voice against being overheard by Sandy Spence, Rennick's clerk, who was busy with his ledgers in the rear office. "It is bad, I know, but just between ourselves, it must have been a grand fight, Duncan!"

The sly pleasantry that lurked in the Curé's words won a grunt of disapproval from the magistrate.

"It was terrible!" he declared vehemently. "Father, I can't describe it! I repeat, I can't describe it! I know we should be used to such things—it burns up a lot of excess enthusiasm quickly, as you say—but I tell you, I was on the point of telegraphing to Thomaston for the police. It would have been bad enough without that fool La Flamme inciting them to greater violence."

"La Flamme——" The twinkle died out of the Curé's eyes. "Duncan, what truth is there in the tale that he killed Dolan?"

"Abundant evidence to convict!" Duncan Rennick unconsciously drew himself up and spoke with all the austerity he used on the bench. "A cold-blooded, premeditated murder, Father. La Flamme hasn't a word to say in his own defense."

IT WAS no more than Father Despard had already heard, but coming from the magistrate gave it a new significance. He was silent for a moment. When he spoke there was a great compassion in his voice.

"The pity of it," he said. "I find it almost impossible to believe. I have known Napolean for years. He worked for me for a time. I've never known a better man in a canoe or on the trail. I've camped with him on the river and in the woods, under conditions that would try any man, but he was always patient, kindly. Big and strong as he is, the sight of blood sickened him. He was with me the time Tite Roubideaux lost his leg at St. Suspice. There was no doctor, so I did what I could. I had only Napolean to help me. But he was no good; if he had not gone outside he would have fainted. So you see it's hard for me to believe—knowing him as I do—that he would kill a man—with a knife it is said."

"With a knife, Father—while the man was asleep." The magistrate's tone was almost pitying in its eloquent contempt for what he considered the Curé's misplaced sympathy. Father Despard was not abashed.

"Just what are the facts, Duncan?"

"It happened night before last in the long shanty at Thirty Mile. The Company had about fifty men working the white water. Dolan had come down river to lend a hand and boss one of the shifts. To guard against another jam like they had last year, they were working the river day and night. It's a bad stretch. But I do not have to tell you that. You know the river and shanties better than I."

"Of course," Father Despard nodded, anxious for him to be on with his tale. "I've often crawled out of the rain, glad to spend the night there. But go on."

"Well, La Flamme was working in Dolan's shift. As you know, they never had been friends——"

"And with good reason, I daresay," the Curé interrupted. "Alive, Blaze Dolan had no friends."

The observation seemed to nettle the lean Scot. Although not a Catholic, he yielded to no one in his admiration for this stalwart son of the Church, shrivelled and white-haired now who had toiled among them for almost three score years—a lifetime in a rough country among rough men who, irrespective of religion held him in esteem. But he had settled this matter to his complete satisfaction in his own mind; and since he was the magistrate, he did not propose to be questioned or contradicted on any subject that concerned the law or its violaters.

"I ask you to remember, Father, that the Company found him a good man; they had made him woods-boss. I've heard the talk that he was a bully, a clubber of men; but when La Flamme was arraigned before me no evidence was introduced to the effect that Dolan had abused him. La Flamme made no such claim. All he would say was, 'He was a beast; he deserved to be killed, and I'm glad he's dead.'"

"And he *was* a bad man," Father Despard said bluntly. "He was not only a bully among men but a violater of women . . . You know me too well to misunderstand what I say," he added as the magistrate bristled indignantly. "I have never counselled violence—not even when this country was more remote than it is today, and there was no law this side of Thomaston. If Napolean La Flamme killed Dolan, I hold no brief for him. But, old friend, do not ask me to close my eyes to the unsavory character of the murdered man. There is always a motive for murder. I do not know what you have discovered, but if it was not committed in redress for some injury Dolan had done I am less inclined than ever to believe Napolean killed him. How was the crime discovered?"

"One of the Autry brothers—Gabriel—cut his foot. He was working on the first night shift. It was about eleven o'clock. Dolan and his crew were to come on at midnight. Well, Gabriel went to the shanty to care for the injured foot. As you know, the Company keeps a supply of medicines and dressings there for just such emergencies. They are kept in the room at the end of the long shanty. Dolan was sleeping in that room. But since he was in charge, Gabriel did not hesitate about waking him, for it was necessary to have Dolan sign the requisition before the medical supplies could be issued."

Father Despard edged his chair closer to Duncan Rennick's.

"Naturally I am familiar with the Company's rules," he said. "Tell me, were there other men asleep in the big room outside?"

"Exactly so! Apparently there had been no commotion, no sound of a struggle. But let me continue; Gabriel opened the door to the end room and walked in. He had a lantern in his hand. He raised it as he entered, and there before him stood La Flamme, a blood-smeared knife in his hand. On the floor lay Dolan—dead!"

THE Curé sank back in his chair, his eyes half closed as he tried to visualize the horror of that tragic scene. It saddened him. His long years of service in the North had taught him to expect, even to condone, those minor crimes of violence which are an inevitable part of life in a frontier country where women are few and men, for the most part, are single, living in boarding-houses or company shanties, strangers to those home and family influences which are an accepted part of life in the older parishes of Ontario and Quebec. However, he had seldom been confronted with murder.

It made him wonder if he had failed in his duty to the men to whom he had dedicated his life, for he was their adviser in [illegible]ly matters as well as spiritual. The

religion he had taught them was such as one instills in children, because he realized they were only children, easily influenced, easily led astray.

"A ghastly thing to consider," he mused aloud. "A life snuffed out; perhaps a cruel, unsavory life, but still a life. And why? For what reason? Men do not kill wantonly."

The Curé was so plainly distressed that the magistrate relented, convinced that he had proven the enormity of the crime.

"It is not for us to give a reason, Father," he said, his tone milder. "Those things always come out at the trial. La Flamme came before me only to be arraigned. You see, I had to hold him."

"Of course! There was nothing else for you to do. I was not questioning the course you took; I know you are a just man. But tell me, Duncan, how long had Dolan been dead when Gabriel entered the room?"

"Perhaps ten minutes——"

"As long as that, eh? Strange, Napolean made no effort to get away." Before the magistrate could answer, Father Despard added, "I suppose Gabriel called the others in at once."

"But yes——"

"And Napolean made no attempt to escape them?"

The magistrate shifted about nervously in his chair. The Curé's questions for some reason gave him the feeling of being on the defensive.

"No, there was no trouble," he admitted grudgingly. "He gave himself up. They sent for M. Desforges, the superintendent. There was no train down until morning, so they held him in the long shanty until daylight. They brought him in then and turned him over to Esdras." He paused to give the Curé a disarming smile. "I wouldn't distress myself too much about this, Father," he suggested. "I appreciate your sympathy for La Flamme. But the facts are plain; there is nothing to do but let the law take its course."

FATHER DESPARD suspected that his old friend was sorely tried at his questions; but he was not through, even though he nodded resignedly.

"Undoubtedly you are right, Duncan; I know you have given the matter deep thought. Perhaps it is best, as you say, to wait and see what develops at the trial. No one else has been implicated?"

"No, no," the magistrate answered with great positiveness. He had never known the Curé to hang on like this. "There were no accomplices. Remember that Dolan was asleep when he was killed. Would a man of La Flamme's great strength need an accomplice?"

Father Despard smiled contritely.

"You see how inexperienced I am," he murmured humbly. "You must forgive me; it is very difficult for me to understand these things. Napolean La Flamme would hardly need an assistant. He is strong enough to slay a man with his bare hands, let alone with a knife. And did he admit his guilt?"

"He neither admitted nor denied it," Rennick replied with asperity. "His silence is admission enough. I repeat, the facts speak for themselves. The innocent are always frank; the only statement La Flamme has made is, 'He was a beast; he deserved to be killed, and I'm glad he's dead.'"

"And that, of course, is only an opinion —not a confession."

"And a most amazing statement, under the circumstances—and one that will be used against him," the magistrate answered sharply, his patience at an end. Smarting with offended dignity, he thought, "I would not presume to tell him how to conduct the affairs of his Church, yet he does not hesitate to infer that he could do much better than I as a magistrate."

He arose in the hope that the Curé would take it as a hint to leave. But the little priest sat with bowed head, eyes on the floor as he pursued his thoughts.

"Perhaps you would like to speak to the

prisoner," the harassed Scot suggested. "Maybe you could get something out of him." There was a dig in his words, and not so sly either. Father Despard's lips parted in a faint smile.

"I was about to ask permission to speak with him," he said, reaching for his hat.

"By all means, Father. Esdras is there now; he will admit you. I trust you will advise La Flamme to stay away from the window and stop inciting the crowd to violence. You might — dwell on the seriousness of his crime and the penalty for it."

"I will do what I can," the Curé promised, "but I must remind you that as his spiritual advisor I may hold inviolate any confidence he reposes in me."

"That is a right which the law recognizes," the magistrate murmured as he shook his hand. Father Despard regarded him intently, noting the strained look in his eyes.

"I apologize, old friend," he hastened to say. "I'm afraid I've wearied you. You look tired, Duncan. When we are sorely tried we are apt to forget that others often are, too."

Duncan Rennick winced unconsciously. He was indeed sorely tried, but he had believed the secret his own.

"It is nothing," he hurried to assure Father Despard. "You know business is not what it should be." He took a step toward the door, hoping to hurry the Curé on his way before he should mention his son's name. In the last few minutes, the magistrate had decided definitely against taking the good man into his confidence concerning the boy.

"But you are thrifty and better prepared for a rainy day than most," Father Despard reminded him. "There are only you and Bruce to share it. By the way, where is the boy? I don't see him about. Usually he is the first to greet me. Is he away?"

Old Duncan opened the door and pretended not to have heard the question. Father Despard repeated it; he was fond of Bruce Rennick.

"Yes, away," the magistrate answered absent-mindedly, as though the matter were of trifling importance and it was quite the usual thing for his son to be away, which was not the case at all. He gave the Curé a patronizing smile that did not invite further questions. The little priest persisted, however, never suspecting how trying had become his well-meant interest in the boy. Secretly he had long felt that Duncan had held the lad down too hard, denying him those little luxuries which the sons of other men of his standing enjoyed and which he could well afford. Little things like city made clothes and the right to have a dollar of his own in his pocket; all of which mean so much to boys of Bruce's age.

IF THE Curé beamed on the lad's father it was because he was glad the boy was having his chance at last, taking it for granted that Duncan had sent him down to Thomaston, or better still, Sault Ste. Marie.

"Excellent! I'm glad you are letting the boy have a little fling," the magistrate was surprised to hear him say. "He is an industrious, dependable lad. I tell you, you'll not find his equal in this town. But boys today are not satisfied with what contented us, my friend. They must have store clothes and a little jewelry with which to dazzle the girls. It is something for a boy to be able to say he has been to the Soo, or even to Thomaston."

"I'm expecting him home presently," Duncan cut in, hoping to forestall the question of where Bruce had gone. If he drew the line at a direct lie, he had no qualms about resorting to evasion if it would serve his purpose. He had not said that the boy had gone down the lake on a little holiday jaunt—though it was an ad-

mirable excuse to cover Bruce's absence from home—nor was he, under the circumstances, in any position to correct that surmise.

Things were at such a pass with him that he was afraid to speak. Bruce had been gone three days now. A proud man, torn with anxiety, he still hoped that events would so shape themselves that no one ever need know the reason for his going or where he had been.

In a desperate resolve to end the conversation before he was deeper enmeshed in the coils of deceit, he walked out on the steps and looked about for Esdras. He was delighted to discover the old man sluicing down the stairs that led up to the jail. He hailed him at once and then turned to the Curé.

"Here is Esdras now, Father," he announced. "He will take you up."

His sudden solicitude caused Father Despard to suspect he was being dismissed; but the good man murmured his thanks.

"Have Bruce come to see me when he returns," he said as Esdras approached, hat in hand. "He'll have some tales to tell, I venture. And if he's spent a dollar or two more than you expected, Duncan—be patient with him. Think what it would mean to be eighteen again!"

III

FOR THE BEST MAN AND THE WORST

BUT my son, if you are innocent you must speak," the Curé repeated. "I will do anything to help you, and you must help yourself." His patience was long, but Polean La Flamme had refused to be drawn out. "If there is a baffling mystery here that even you do not understand, you must help the authorities to solve it."

The big man shook his head doggedly.

"But, no, Father! Let dem prove I am guilty if dey can!"

"I'm afraid that is the wrong attitude to take," said the Curé. "It is well enough to claim a man is innocent until he is proven guilty; but that theory loses its meaning when a web of circumstantial evidence is woven about the accused. Then your silence condemns you—just as M. Rennick has said."

"M'sieu' Rennick is a fool!" the prisoner exclaimed angrily. "How he know so much, Father?"

"No, no, Napolean," the little man of the Church murmured reprovingly, "the magistrate is a good man. He means well. The uncontradicted evidence was such that he was compelled to put you in jail. Your silence did not help him. I am afraid you are relying on the fact that, being what he was, the law will not trouble itself unduly about Dolan's murderer. I warn you it will not matter at all. Before the law the crime would have been no greater had he been the best man among us."

The Curé saw the big fellow's eyes waver, and he thought he had won, but the next moment La Flamme's mouth tightened with new determination.

"Me, I don' know not'ing 'bout these t'ing you call de law, Father, except she's bad for poor man." He raised his hand to his heart and thumped his chest. "But in here I know what is right. So I not 'fraid for Polean La Flamme."

M. the Curé bowed his head. A great pity moved him. He had toiled too long among these children of the woods and the marshlands not to understand that when they sought justice their dependence rested in Heaven, in the all-compassionate God that he and his predecessors had brought them, rather than in the courts an alien race had set up among them. Their simple ideas of right and wrong did not always parallel the law. He knew there would be many *habitants* in his parish, honest, God-fearing men, who would never look upon the slaying of Blaze Dolan as a criminal act, men who would have relentlessly pursued the murderer of a better man.

Inevitably, the thought struck at his faith in the big fellow's innocence. Judge of men that he was, he knew Polean La Flamme's conscience bothered him not at all. But he was reminded that it could

not be taken as a true gauge of the man's innocence. He could be guilty without feeling any sense of guilt. That was usually the case, he had found, when the law plucked them out of their humble homes to be tried by a jury of their peers for some legal infraction, when, more often than not, they had only been seeking redress for wrongs that had been done them. Enmeshed in the law they were helpless. They appealed to him, and often he could do nothing.

FATHER DESPARD shook his gray head as though to banish the unhappy thought that some day soon this stalwart companion of the rivers and woods might similarly find himself at bay, helpless, bewildered, his last trail opening before him, unable to understand, even to the end, why he owed society a debt which only his life could cancel.

It was enough to make the Curé stay on, unwilling to admit he had failed. "You understand, my son, that my only thought is to help you?"

Polean La Flamme's eyes misted suspiciously as he smiled at the little priest with the honest affection one man may feel for another.

"Father—what else could I t'ink? I'm sorry I mak' you so much trouble. Please not to worry 'bout Polean La Flamme; he's beeg fool for bother you so."

"Don't say that, my son. I regret only that you refuse to let me help you. I am convinced you do not understand the seriousness of the situation. If you are holding back any information that might help to establish your innocence or cast doubt on your guilt, you are very foolish. It is a time for frankness; presently it will be too late. You will be on trial among strangers, and they will be swayed only by the evidence. With all the earnestness I have, I must tell you that if the evidence remains as it is today, unaltered and without any new facts being established, you will be found guilty and hanged by the neck until you are dead."

His words were not without effect on the prisoner. The big fellow's face paled as he turned away to stare with unseeing eyes at the street below. Years back, in Cobalt, he had seen a man hanged by a mob of infuriated miners. The memory of it, the writhing body, black against the westering sun, has remained with him; and he saw it now with photographic clearness. His lips twitched nervously.

Father Despard was watching him closely, his own face drawn with anxiety.

"It is a horrible thing to contemplate, my son," he murmured gravely.

However, the iron in Polean La Flamme won. He resolved that this talk of hanging should not loosen his tongue. Perhaps the Curé was right; the evidence might convict him. He did not want to die. But the thought was premature. Much could happen between now and tomorrow before the police came. The locks were strong but perhaps he could find a way out of this jail.

Originally he had not contemplated flight. Since it seemed advisable, he asked only to be free, with an hour's start, and they could put every trooper in the Thomaston barracks on his trail and be welcome to what they found.

THERE was new courage in his bearing as he turned back to the Curé.

"Father, I know I get myself in bad boat. Always when you say, 'Polean, you do theese'; me, I do him. For de first tam' I mus' say no. I got not'ing to say."

He touched the priest's hand reverently. Father Despard sat silent.

"Since you will not talk," he said finally, "I shall. Listen to me carefully, my son. Last winter, just before the men went to the lumber shanties, I administered the last rites to a poor, unfortunate girl who had been outraged." He saw the prisoner try to repress a start of surprise; but he went on, pretending not to have noticed. "I sat beside her those last few minutes. In her delirium she called on God to curse the man who had wronged her—and the name

she mentioned was that of the man whom you are accused of having murdered. You know to whom I refer——"

"Azalma Larocque——"

"Azalma Larocque!" The Curé hesitated, hunting for words, and the silence became oppressive. "Is it reasonable to assume that the events leading to her death had anything to do with the killing of Blaze Dolan?"

The prisoner met Father Despard's glance with unwavering eyes, his face a swarthy, inscrutable mask.

"But why, Father? Azalma Larocque was not my daughter."

"She was the daughter of your best friend. This winter, for the first time in years, you and François did not go to the shanties together."

"François not feel so good." The prisoner's eyes were hard. "He got not'ing left since Azalma go. All de tam' got pain in his head. These place no good for him no more. I tell him he better go on United States."

Father Despard nodded thoughtfully.

"I remember when he left. It was just after the New Year. Poor man, he was crushed. I feared he was losing his mind. All he would talk about was Azalma."

"She was a good girl, Father——"

"And so pretty . . . I used to see her of a Sunday afternoon, out walking with Bruce Rennick—laughing, happy. They were young—of different faiths—but it looked as if it might be a match. Azalma would have won him over to the Church ——"

"M. Rennick would never have stan' for dat!" the prisoner rasped fiercely. "He don' lak' have dat boy go wid Azalma. He stop him lak' he kept him from fish and hunt wid me. I know why we don' see not'ing dat boy. Duncan Rennick t'ink we ain't good enough for him."

"That's easy to say, my son," the Curé murmured reprovingly. "But you must not let your bitterness run away with you. M. Rennick is a proud, stubborn man. But he is not foolhardy. Love always finds a way. He could not have held out for long. Bruce was very fond of Azalma——" He broke off abruptly, his thin cheeks paling. "Could Bruce Rennick have killed Blaze Dolan?" he asked himself, his throat dry with consternation.

Polean La Flamme stared at him dumbly, failing to read the thought that drove the blood from the little man's face.

BRUCE RENNICK had been away three days. He had loved Azalma Larocque, Father Despard recalled. How vague Duncan had been about the boy! He had not volunteered any information other than that his son would be home presently.

"It is strange," he thought. "It was I who suggested that Bruce had gone down the lake. Duncan let me draw my own conclusions . . . and said nothing."

Why had the magistrate insisted so vehemently that Polean La Flamme was guilty? Was he afraid that suspicion might be directed toward his own son?

The Curé did not know what to think. Life had suddenly become a bewildering thing. Out of the ferment in his mind, one thing appeared certain; the ghostly hand of Azalma Larocque had directed the knife that killed Blaze Dolan.

Father Despard got to his feet shakily. Polean reached out a hand to steady him.

"What's de matter, Father, you not feel well, eh?"

The Curé smiled faintly.

"I am all right, my son; it is nothing. I am going to leave you. I want to be alone

—to think, to ask our Heavenly Father for guidance. I will pray for you. You should address yourself to Him, too; He will not fail to help you."

He crossed himself and murmured an Our Father and an Ave. Polean La Flamme bowed his head and made the responses.

"I will see you again before the police take you away," the Curé promised. When he reached the head of the stairs, he paused for a last word.

"Napolean, how long were you at Thirty Mile?"

"Mebbe 'bout two week."

"Did you see Bruce Rennick up there?"

The big fellow shrugged his shoulders incredulously.

"But no, Father! M. Rennick never let him come on de shanties. You know dat!"

"That's true," Father Despard agreed, not bothering to look back as he started down the stairs, so engrossed in his thoughts that he failed to warn the prisoner against further inciting the howling, drinking mob that had taken possession of Pointe Aux Barques.

THE afternoon wore on. The murky skies darkened and the rain fell in a steady downpour. Across the way, a man staggered to the door of Dan La Pointe's saloon and bawled defiance to the world. Down the street, the Irish were whooping it up. Some one was singing:

"I met a man the other day I'd never met before.
He asked me if I wanted a job shovelin' iron ore.
I asked him what the wages were, he said, 'Ten cents a ton.'
I said, 'Oh fellow go chase yerself, I'd rather be on the bum!'
It was early in the mornin'——"

The singer ended on a cracked note as a rock shattered the window at his back. The glass fell with a shivery crash. It was a call to battle.

It failed to rouse Polean La Flamme. He sat on the edge of his bunk, his head in his hands, wrestling with his problem. Father Despard had come near enough to the truth to convince him that they soon would have the facts out of him; and he was not ready for that. He had long since decided that morning should find him far from Pointe Aux Barques. But how was he to get free of the jail? It was that which engaged him now.

The window offered no hope of escape. He had tried the lock on the door. It was old, but still strong. Esdras was his only chance. He didn't want to hurt the old man. He would have to trick him someway.

"I get de key when he brings my supper," he mused. "She get dark early tonight. Somehow I get dose key."

Gradually a plan of action formed in his mind. It drove him to the window, to sing and shout as he had done all morning long. Duncan Rennick came out and shook his fist at him. The crowd howled its delight.

SONS of Pointe Aux Barques and the St. Michel men had answered the call of their leaders. Little Remy Ledoux had armed himself with a peavey. He started to advance, swinging it about his head, but he was so drunk he fell to the sidewalk and was unable to get up. All were too far along in liquor to fight as they had that morning. The cold, beating rain dampened their enthusiasm; and when the kerosene lamps of the town's stores began to gleam fitfully through the gathering darkness of late afternoon, and the squealing of a fiddle announced that the girls were ready, the dancing about to begin in the Great Northern, wholesale desertions thinned the ranks on both sides until the leaders were forced to call it a day.

A FEW minutes after six, Esdras trudged up the stairs with the prisoner's supper. Night had closed down.

A cold wind came screaming in off the lake, lashing Superior with its fury.

Polean La Flamme could hear the old man muttering to himself.

"For my part, I would let him go hungry," he was saying. "But put a man in jail and a woman can not do enough for him." He had reference to his wife.

The lantern he carried lit up the way ahead of him. When he reached the top of the stairs, he put the tray on the floor and lighted a wall lamp, turning the wick down so that it would burn all night.

"So you are still there, eh?" he scolded as he saw the prisoner standing at his cell door. "It is a pity to have to feed you. You might come to your senses if you got hungry enough. Mocking the magistrate! *Mon Dieu!* They'll change your tune for you in Thomaston!"

"Mebbe dey mak' me sing hout of de hudder side of my mout', huh?" the big fellow laughed.

Esdras bent down to push the tray of food under the cell door.

"If you try it," he warned with evident pleasure, "you'll do your singing in a straight jacket. They'll let you know you're in a——"

The words died in his throat. Polean La Flamme's hand had flashed out through the bars and closed around his neck. He tried to break free of the tightening arm. A babe could not have been more helpless. He thought to scream a call for help. But iron fingers shut off his wind. His face was wedged in between the bars.

"Now, old chatter-box, I mak' some talk!" the prisoner ground out, relieving his jailer of his gun. "Firs' you open these door. And, by Gar, no monkey-beesness, Esdras!"

Old Esdras was made of stern stuff. He had never opened a cell door for any prisoner entrusted to his care; and he made no move to comply now.

"So you t'ink I'm foolin', eh?" Polean La Flamme queried. "Hall right, I change your mind for you!" His arm tightened, the muscles standing out in ridges.

Esdras decided that discretion might be the better part of valor. He produced the keys and opened the lock. Before he could catch his breath, the big fellow caught him by the shoulder and pushed him into the cell. The door clanged shut and Polean La Flamme shot the bolt.

"Bagosh, we see how you like these jail," he roared, tossing the key away. "Too damn bad we spoil dat grub." He retrieved what he could of it and gulped it down with relish. "Mebbe long tam' 'fore I heat again."

Esdras rubbed his neck.

"Now you've got two crimes to answer for!" he got out furiously.

"Dey can honly hang me once," Polean La Flamme reminded him with a chuckle as he started down the stairs.

"You won't get far!" Esdras screamed. He ran to the window and called for help. Men were in the street below, but they paid no attention to him, thanks to the big fellow's strategy. Cries from that window had amused them all day, and they were off to keener pleasures now.

KEEPING to the docks wherever he could, the fleeing man made his way unnoticed to the Company boat-house beside the new log basin. The place was never locked. He knew he could find a canoe there.

The Laurier Company had its own light plant. Bulbs were strung over the basins. The night shift was working, despite the weather. The big fellow watched them until he was sure from their manner that no alarm had been sounded as yet. It was a dirty night, and they were intent only on their work.

He got a canoe into the water without attracting their attention. In a few minutes he had reached the end of the dock. The rain still beat down. Before him was the open storm-lashed lake. A sea was running that would have deterred one less familiar with its moods than he. The long dock trembled as the big rollers struck

the piling. He cast a weather eye at it.

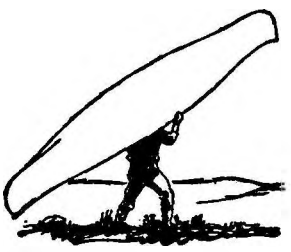
"Pretty rough even for ole mushrat lak' me," he admitted, as the wind tore at him. "But, by Gar, I can't stop now! Come daylight, I be on de Grand Marais or at de bottom of de Lac."

He was soon wet to the skin. For all his skill, the frail craft shipped water as it rode up the crests of the giant waves and plunged into the black abysses beyond. Until he rounded the point he had to hold the canoe's nose into the teeth of the rising nor'wester. It called for great strength and a stout heart. He had them to spare. In him was the blood of generations of *voyageurs*.

Wet as he was, his body began to warm through his exertion. He had often come to grips with the weather and licked it at his own game. No water had ever been too rough, no trail too long for him. Where a man could go, he had gone.

THE booming of the surf roared in his ears as he neared the end of the point. Three years back he had seen a freighter tossed up on its rocky tip. In fours hours the seas had pounded the vessel to kindling. The thought whipped him to greater effort. A wild exultation took possession of him. He knew he was winning; that in half an hour he would be around the point and flying before the wind.

He began to talk to the canoe, encouraging it as though it were a living thing, capable of understanding. It dove on like a frightened black swan, mocking the forces that would destroy it.



The lights of Pointe Aux Barques were left behind. A madman, afloat in a cockleshell, Polean La Flamme's insane laugh rose above the noise of the storm as he swung the canoe broadside to the seas for a terrifying second, felt her wallow drunkenly and then lift as if on wings to race away with express-train speed for the sandy spit, ten miles to the south, that, even in high water, separated lake and the unlogged waterways of that vast, island-dotted wilderness which was the Grand Marais, on whose creeks and weed-clogged canals a man could journey for days without leaving any sign to say that he had passed.

IV

WHERE THE LOON CALLS

MORNING dawned gray and sullen. Half a mile off the Grand Marais sand bar an overturned canoe rose and fell with the swells. Somewhere in its wake drifted a broken paddle. The wind had shifted suddenly. Slowly but surely the canoe was on its way back to Pointe Aux Barques.

A man crawled out on the white sand presently and shook himself like a great, shaggy dog. It was Polean La Flamme. He eyed the drifting canoe for minutes, a smile of satisfaction gradually wreathing his lips. He had upset the frail craft and broken the paddle in the hope that, when found, it might be taken for granted that Lake Superior had claimed him as it had so many others.

The Grand Marais bar was over three miles long. It was a barren stretch of sand, save for two or three twine-houses and the big reels on which the fishermen tarred their nets each Spring and Fall. The buildings stood together, half a mile below where the fugitive had come ashore. He sat out for them at a brisk walk.

One of the twine-houses belonged to François Laroque and him. For fourteen years they had trapped and fished together. He went to it directly. The place was not locked. Nothing was stolen there. Indeed, save for the dozen or more men who took a living from the great marsh, no one was ever seen on the bar.

It was a tiny, disreputable-looking place that served its purpose well enough, never

having been intended for use as a shanty. Twine, a small punt, and miscellaneous gear littered the place. The air was heavy with the odor of tar.

Polean La Flamme closed the door after him and surveyed the familiar room with pleasure. During the winter the roof had sprung a leak; a pool of water stood on the floor. He was hardly aware of it. It was enough to be out of the wind, with a chance to dry his clothes.

The stove on which they boiled their tar stood in a corner. He made a fire. The little place was soon comfortable. He undressed and hung his clothes to dry. The steam began to arise from them as he hunted for something to eat. There was nothing—not even a pipeful of tobacco.

"Bagosh, I not stayin' in these place long," he muttered. "My mout' feel lak my t'roat was cut, I'm so hungry!"

Before his clothes had finished drying he had examined the punt and repaired a seam. He knew the boat would leak for a while; it had been out of water for almost six months. Obviously, he could not launch it and wait there for the seams to swell. Certainly he had been missed hours back. By now, the Mounted Police were on his trail. The first place they would look was here, hoping to stop him before he lost himself on the great marsh.

At least pursuit could come from only one direction; that was down the lake. Laurier Company had a small tug in commission that would be placed at the service of the officers. Six hours from the time they left Pointe Aux Barques they would be standing off the bar. They could put a small boat over and be ashore in no time.

He had no sooner pulled on his pants than he went to the door and studied the lake to the north. A distant smudge of smoke warned him that he had tarried long enough.

"Bagosh, dey don' waste no time," he murmured.

It took him only a minute to finish dressing. He ran the punt out then. The rain had ceased falling. He studied the swollen waters of the marsh. Twenty minutes after he launched the boat he would be hidden from view among the tules and brown sedge grass.

There was nothing to keep him further. He bent down and got the punt over his shoulders. It was fully a hundred yards to the water's edge, but he made it without stopping. He put the boat down and righted it.

"I guess we go," he said as he gave it a shove and jumped in. Using a long, two bladed paddle, he sent the light craft along almost as swiftly as though it were a canoe.

THE smoke to the north was appreciably nearer. It caused him no great concern. Canada's scarlet-coated police had been on the marsh before looking for men. Usually they had had Polean La Flamme or François Larocque to guide them. They would have no one now. Not a *habitant* on the Grand Marais but was glad Blaze Dolan had been killed, and they would never lift a hand to help run down the man who was alleged to have murdered him.

"Dose feller is waste their tam'," he assured himself. "Dey never catching me."

It was his intention to go to his cabin, deep in the Grand Marais, at once. He would find a good canoe there. He would load it with food enough to last him for weeks; a man needed little enough with fish and game so abundant. Once away from the shanty, he never would return, knowing it would be watched. Later on, when the weather turned mild, he would steal back to the lake and in some way get across to Michigan, where he would have little to fear.

Now that he had reached cover there was no longer any great need of haste. Though apparently tireless, his gruelling tussle with the lake had sapped his strength, and he was glad enough for this respite, sending the punt along leisurely from one channel to another, often through openings so nar-

row that they promised no outlet, but which, inevitably, carried him toward his goal.

AT THIS time of the year the Grand Marais presented a gloomy, forbidding picture with its withered grasses and its cedars, black against the gray skies; the silence unbroken save for the whirring of wings overhead as ducks arose at his approach—mallards and red-heads that had wintered there where the warm springs kept the water open the year around—the splashing of muskrats and the mournful crying of the loons.

Polean La Flamme felt a sense of peace creeping over him that he had not known in months. He had been born to solitude. Only in the crowded town had he ever known loneliness. The depths of the marsh and the big woods teemed with life for him.

Knowing the location of every cabin on the Grand Marais it was easy enough for him to avoid them, although, with one or two exceptions, they were deserted this early in the Spring.

Noon had passed when, through a screen of nodding cat-tails, he caught his first glimpse of the little island on which his shanty stood. Though convinced that his pursuers could not have arrived there before him, he watched it for half an hour before he broke cover, satisfied that no foe lurked there. In his eagerness to be ashore, he sent the punt ahead with long strokes of the paddle, and in a few minutes he reached his pond boat, which lay on the bank, half-filled with water as he had left it last fall after the fishing was over.

The cabin stood back among the trees, fifty yards from the water's edge. Lulled to complete security, he strode up to the front door and flung it open.

"Don't move!" a voice commanded. Sitting up in the bunk in the corner, a shotgun to his shoulder, was Bruce Rennick, the boy's sunken gray eyes bright with fever and outrage.

Polean La Flamme's mouth fell open with utter amazement, and he stood rooted to the spot, unable to speak. When his brain began to function and understanding was forced on him, a snarl of withering contempt twisted his lips. His body hunched as though he was about to leap across the room, regardless of danger.

The boy saw the movement.

"Don't try it!" he warned. "I'll shoot if you do, Polean!"

His tone carried conviction. The big fellow's shoulders relaxed.

"Mon Dieu!" he groaned. "I didn't t'ink you do these to me, Bruce! I bring you here, show you how to make de pon' boat go, and fish—all de t'ing a boy lak' to do. If you my hown boy not treat you better. You pay me well for all dat, eh?"

The boy did not relax his vigilance, but a perplexed look crept into his eyes that said he did not understand; that deception lurked in the man's words. "It's a trick of some sort," he thought; "but I won't be trapped."

"You should talk to me of friendship," he whipped out. "I might have known this would happen. I suppose my father paid you to come."

Polean La Flamme's head went back as he stared incredulously.

"By Gar, you mus' be crazee'!" he roared. "Your father not pay me not'ing; he put me in jail! Don' try mak' fool with me, Bruce! You know Blaze Dolan get kill night 'fore last; dat your father say I done it and slam me in jail."

"What?" the boy gasped, unable to credit his ears. "Is that true?"

"Bah! You don' have to hact surprise lak' dat for me," the other sneered. "You know de trut'. I don' see you in town—and for good reason. You know dat Pointe Aux Barques jail not hold me if I want to get hout. If I escape, mebbe dey put reward on me. Pretty easy for you to figure where I go. So you come here and wait, eh?"

He followed it with a torrent of French, his patois imposing a handicap that prevented him from expressing all the bitter-

ness that was in his heart. When he had finished it was young Bruce's turn to stare speechlessly.

"You are wrong, Polean," he got out at last; "I came here to hide. . . . you are sure you did not come to take me back?"

"Say, what is dis fonny beesness? Why I come here to get you? Me, I'm de wan come here to hide; not you. I suppose dis fine joke. Bagosh, you better not drop those gun, Bruce; I break your neck for you!"

UNMINDFUL of the threat, the boy put down the shotgun and fell back on the bed exhausted, convinced that the big man had not come there to take him back to Pointe Aux Barques.

"Polean. . . . come here," he sighed wearily, a throb of pain racking him. "I'm —so glad you came."

"What?" The big man took a step forward and then stopped, pathetic in his uncertainty. "Bruce. . . . what is it?" Anger had gone from his voice.

Only now was he aware of the boy's drawn face, his flushed cheeks and fevered eyes. He bent over him anxiously.

"You won't let them take me back to Pointe Aux Barques—will you?" the lad pleaded. Perspiration dampened his finely chiselled forehead.

"No wan tak' you no place," Polean murmured. "But you—somet'ing is wrong wid you, Bruce!"

"My foot——"

"Your foots?"

"Yes," the boy answered, his fingers closing over the other's hand. "My gun was on the bottom of the boat. I was using the punt-pole. I don't know what happened. The gun went off. I cut my boot away and got the blood stopped. It's pretty bad, Polean——"

"You bat my life she's bad! Dat's fine way to get blood poison." La Flamme threw back the blankets and stared at the blood-soaked shirt with which the boy had tried to bind up the wound. "When all these happen?"

"The first night I was on the marsh—three days now. You know the place where François shot the big goose last fall? It was there it happened. I—I dragged myself in here on my hands." He smiled wistfully at the big man. "I spoiled your blankets, Polean——"

"Why talk lak' dat?" La Flamme scowled. "Ain't you do not'ing for dose foots?"

"I was so weak. And then the pain began. . . . the fever. I was afraid some one would come; but I was more afraid I'd die here all alone——"

"No use for talk lak' dat!" Polean protested. "Firs' t'ing, I mak' some fire. She's cold as hice-house in here." He drew the blankets about the boy and got to his feet. From an old chest he drew forth a small jug of brandy. He made Bruce drink half a glassful.

"Bagosh, I guess little of dat stuff don' hurt me neither," he grinned. "I go hout and break up some wood now."

He was alive to his danger in remaining there. He had a few hours' grace, but if the overturned canoe had not fooled the police he could expect them anytime after daylight the next morning. Now that his surprise at finding the boy there had worn itself out, he could smile at the thought that Bruce had come there to trap him.

"Give me a pretty cold chill, hall right," he admitted.

THE boy's presence put a new face on things. He realized he must decide what he was to do. The wisest course seemed to be to dress the wound, do what he could for Bruce, and be on his way. The police would find the boy tomorrow and take him back to Pointe Aux Barques.

With a start he recalled what the lad had said; that he didn't want to go back; that he had come there to hide.

"But it can't be not'ing," he thought. "Bruce is good boy. I suppose de ole man scol' him for somet'ing. I better talk some 'bout dat."

Bruce Rennick followed Polean with his eyes as he came in with the wood and made the fire. Despite the agony his foot was giving him the boy did not whimper.

A tea-kettle was put on to boil. There was little in the shanty with which to properly dress a wound. The big fellow searched for clean cloth. On a shelf above the table he found an almost forgotten bottle of creosote—backwoods remedy for a score of infections. When he had located a basin, his preparations were complete.

Repeatedly he glanced furtively at the boy, the fear growing that the deadly poison was already at work in him.

He was genuinely fond of Bruce, an attachment that had endured for a number of years. If Duncan Rennick had little interest in the old *habitant* customs and pleasures, quite the reverse was true of his son. In the boy's breast beat a fierce love of the soil. It had long since become a bond between them which found expression in their bitter resentment against those who thought only to rape and plunder the land the *habitant* and the old factors had won from the wilderness.

It did not occur to Polean to doubt Bruce's story of how he had come by his injury; he had always found him honest and straightforward. And yet, he could not forget that the boy had said he came there to hide. It forced a question.

"Bruce, what's dat you say 'bout come here to hide?" he asked casually as he placed the basin and bandages on a chair beside the bunk. "For what you want to hide, eh?"

The brandy had made the boy drowsy, but his eyes jerked open and he tried to sit up. Polean pushed him back gently.

"Better you tak' her easy, Bruce," he cautioned. "No use got hexcite for not'ing." He laughed feebly. "Bagosh, I bat you do somet'ing terreeble hall right, come here for hide."

"Please, Polean—don't ask me. I can't tell you——"

"Non? Dat sound bad!" His tone was bantering. "Me, if I don' know better, mebbe I t'ink you kill Blaze Dolan."

Their eyes met in frank scrutiny.

"Yes?" The boy's jaws clenched. "I hated him enough to kill him. Why not say I did? The jig's up with me, anyway."

"Non, non! You didn't have anyt'ing to do wid dat."

"What makes you so sure, Polean?"

Polean La Flamme shook his great head as he communed with himself.

"I know who killed him," he muttered stonily.

"You——?"

The question was sharp enough to warn the big fellow that he had said too much already. He tried to dissemble his chagrin with an amused chuckle.

"I have pretty hard tam' prove I don' do it, I guess," he said. "But don' worry 'bout me, Bruce. Why you come on these place? Mebbe you need Doctor Porier for feex you hup. Why you can't go home?"

Seconds passed before the boy answered.

"Polean—I stole some money—from my father. He'll never forgive me."

"Huh? You tak' some money?"

"A hundred dollars!" Bruce seemed willing to talk, now that he had confessed his secret. "About two weeks ago I got a letter concerning François——"

"What?" It came as a thunderbolt. Polean La Flamme snapped erect, his eyes bulging with surprise and sudden alarm. "You got lettaire from François?"

"Not from François directly." Bruce misunderstood Polean's amazement, thinking it was due to the fact that he knew François Larocque could not even sign his own name. "It was from his doctor," he explained.

"What he writing you for?"

"He wrote to say that François hasn't

long to live, Polean. You know how he was when he left here. . . . Detroit has not helped him."

"I know——" the big man muttered with deep sympathy. Bruce thought it strange that he took it so calmly, knowing his great affection for Azalma's father.

"He told me medicine could not help him; that François was penniless; but unless he came north at once it would be too late." Bruce's voice trailed away to silence. It was a moment before he could go on. "It broke me all up, that letter. I could only think of François as he used to be—so happy, so gay. I wanted to talk to you. But you were in the woods; the drive had hardly begun. I knew you would have no money until the Company paid off the men."

Polean La Flamme stared grim-faced at the floor. Things that he had not understood were being made clear to him now.

"Well, I spoke to my father, asking him to let me have the money," the boy went on. "I knew he would never give it to me to send to François; so I told him I wanted to go to the Soo; that I had been working for two years and wanted to see a little of the world."

Bruce shook his head unhappily at the memory of that unpleasant scene.

"And course he say no," Polean grumbled without looking up, his bitterness against Duncan Rennick brimming over. "Money! money! money! He don' t'ink of not'ing else, dat man! But he wouldn't give you five-cents piece!"

"I don't want him to give me any money —that is, no more than I had earned." Bruce sighed heavily. "I had helped Sandy with the books and the court orders. Even at ten dollars a week it counts up. I thought the money was mine—to do with as I pleased. But I was wrong; it's mine only to save——"

POLEAN LA FLAMME, who had never put by a dollar in his life, could see no virtue in the magistrate's point that a dollar saved is a dollar truly earned. He did not doubt that Duncan Rennick loved the boy in his own way. But frankly it was a way he could not understand. All he could see was a man, possessing thousands, denying his own son, even to unconsciously making a thief of him, that he might have even more dollars to hoard. It made his blood boil, but all he said was:

"Your father not hunderstand, Bruce; he forget you are halmost a man. But dat doctor should never say not'ing to you—make you hall these trouble. François last person in hall de worl' do that if he know."

"I never want him to know how I got that money," the boy insisted stoutly.

"And how did you got it?"

Bruce let the question go unanswered.

"If I'd only told my father why I really needed it he might have let me have it," he murmured piteously. He groaned in his agony of his mind and body. "But I had to steal it——"

"François never want you to do dat," the big man reminded him.

"Please, Polean, don't scold me. François needed it. . . . and I got it the only way I could. I didn't mean to steal it. The very next day, I was sent to St. Sauveur. There was money due on a note. It was old Antoine Beauvais who runs the station there. He had the money ready for me. With the interest, it was over three hundred dollars. On the way home, I made out a new note for one hundred dollars and signed Antoine's name to it. We often have renewed his notes; I knew neither father nor Sandy would question it. So I kept the hundred and gave Sandy the new note and the balance of the money.

"With Spring so near, it was unlikely Antoine would come to Pointe Aux Barques for months. In the meantime, I would have a chance to work in the mill and earn enough to take care of the note. . . . It didn't work out that way. Everything was all right for ten days; but Tuesday night a lamp exploded in Antoine's hands. He was burned badly. In the morning

they brought him down to Doctor Porier. Before he started home he stepped into the office. I was upstairs. In a minute I knew I'd be found out. I just grabbed my coat and gun and slipped away. I stayed close to the beach. When I got to Bonvouillor's place the old woman let me have a canoe." It reminded him that he had not been able to beach it when he reached the island. "I suppose it's drifted away now. . . . all this high water——"

Polean nodded with a preoccupied air and continued to pursue his thoughts.

"I left it on the other side of the island. The old woman will be expecting me to bring it back."

"I guess it don' go far," Polean answered gruffly. He had more pressing problems than the fate of a canoe. The water in the tea-kettle was boiling noisily. It did not break in on his train of thought.

HE WAS considering the case of Duncan Rennick. He thought he understood the man's vindictiveness now as well as his harried look. He sensed that the magistrate, his lips sealed, though secretly shaken by what Bruce had done, and fearful, too, over what had become of the boy, had suspected him not only knowing what his son had done, but of being directly responsible for it—the result of an association which he had always predicted would end disastrously for Bruce.

"M'sieu' Rennick do anyt'ing for got rid of me now," he told himself. "If police catch me it be pretty bad for Polean La Flamme."

Bruce had fallen back exhausted. His lips twitched with pain. The kettle continued to boil.

"I'm afraid the money came too late to help François—or he would have been in Pointe Aux Barques before now."

Polean La Flamme got to his feet and took the kettle off the stove.

"I guess mebbe he change his mind," he said, his voice toneless. "I better take a look at your foots now, Bruce."

He had just filled the basin with the boiled water when he stiffened suddenly, his ears cocked. Bruce caught his excitement.

"What is it?" he whispered.

The big fellow tiptoed to the door, gun in hand. He opened it an inch and peered out cautiously. It was only a skunk. The animal scampered under the cabin. He laughed as he closed the door and barred it.

"Bagosh, get so my hown shadow scare me, huh?"

V

THE STUFF OF A MAN

JUST before darkness fell, Polean took a turn about the island. There was a chill in the air that felt good against his face. Pain he could stand with fortitude, but as Father Despard had said, he had no stomach for the sight of blood or the suffering of others. He had done what he could for Bruce, and it was a task that called for greater courage than his battle with the lake.

He had found the boy's foot worse than he had feared. Even with his meagre knowledge of such things he knew gangrene had set in; that a doctor was needed at once. He had only been able to cleanse the wound and put on an antiseptic dressing. At best it could only temporarily allay the spreading of the infection.

In his concern for Bruce he quite forgot that he himself was a hunted man. Indeed, he found himself worrying lest the police not be there in the morning. They had to be there if the boy was to have a chance for his life. By motor-driven canoe and tugboat they could have him back in Pointe Aux Barques in a few hours.

Before he returned to the shanty he located Bruce's canoe, trapped in a reed bed, fifty yards off shore. It was safe enough there; it could not drift away.

The big man tiptoed into the cabin, thinking the boy might have fallen asleep. Bruce was wide-awake. He stifled a groan as Polean shut the door and came over to him.

"How you feel now, Bruce?" he asked anxiously. "Not hurt so much, huh?"

"It does hurt—terribly. It feels as though a team of horses was trying to pull my foot off me. . . . It must be awfully bad, Polean."

"Course she hurt to beat de ban'," Polean hedged. There was nothing to be gained by alarming the boy. "Mebbe I give you little more brandy; do you good for sleep t'ree, four hour."

THE liquor had the desired effect. As the boy dozed off, the big fellow's hunger began to make itself felt. He had eaten nothing that day. From a lean-to in back of the shanty he secured a throw-line and found a piece of salt pork with which to bait the hooks. Standing on the bank beside the pond boat, he cast the line into the channel. In a few minutes he hooked two catfish.

It was black night by the time he had skinned and cleaned them. He returned to the shanty. The fire in the stove dimly illumined the room. He cut up the fish, together with onions and potatoes, and dropped them into a pot, covering them with boiling water and seasoning to his taste. Presently the shanty was filled with appetizing odors as the *bouillon* simmered on the fire.

Later, when he had eaten his fill, he got out a small board and a plug of tobacco. He whittled away at it with his knife until he had a handful of shavings. Rubbing them between his palms he soon had them fit for his pipe.

He applied himself to his smoking with all the energy that characterized everything he did. Soon the room was swimming in a haze of pungent, blue smoke. Thus he had sat a thousand nights, warm, well fed, puffing his pipe, at peace with the world. But tonight he had only to glance at the sleeping boy, whimpering with pain, to be filled with anxiety and an ever-increasing sense of alarm.

"Bagosh, de police don' come too quick for me," he murmured softly. "I don' want him to die—not for what he do."

He knew he must have an understanding with Bruce before he left. It was not going to be pleasant. The warm room began to make him drowsy. He could not keep his pipe going. His head nodded and before long he was sound asleep beside the fire.

WHEN he awoke it was well on toward daybreak. Bruce had been watching him for hours. The big fellow blinked his eyes owlishly.

"How you feel, Bruce?"

"Oh, I don't know—better, I guess——"

His appearance belied his words. Polean La Flamme was not fooled. He went to the door and glanced at the sky.

"Be daybreak in an hour," he announced. It was almost time for him to go. He came in and sat down beside the boy. "I mak' some *bouillon,*" he smiled. "How you lak' have little, Bruce? Mak' you strong."

Bruce said he was not hungry, but the big fellow insisted on feeding him a cupful of the thick broth. Now that it was time to tell him what he had in mind he found it hard to begin. He made several lame attempts without getting anywhere. Finally Bruce surprised him by saying:

"I know you must go, Polean. Don't mind me; I'll be all right."

"Bagosh 'bout tam' I t'ink of dat," he answered naïvely. "Police come on these place pretty soon, I guess."

"Well, I've got my gun. When you go I'll bolt the door. I don't mind dying; I'm not afraid anymore. But I'm not going to let them take me back, Polean."

"Why you talk lak' dat?" the big man demanded fiercely. "I'm goin mak' plain talk wid you, Bruce. Father Despard come on de jail to see me. You t'ink if your father say anyt'ing he not talk wid

him? *Non!* The Curé don' say not'ing 'bout these beesness to me. If he know, he say somet'ing damn quick. Your father not tell no wan. He's too shamed for himself. When dey bring me in he jump on me wid both feets. Now I know why. I tell you he is all bus' hup. This teach him good lesson. He is so crazee for get you back he do anyt'ing! Yet you talk about die here; not go back! By Gar, I tak' care your gun!"

His argument made little impression on the boy. He shook his head doggedly.

"You don't know my father as well as I do, Polean——"

"So? Bagosh, I begin t'ink you is big bullhead as your father! I tell you, police be surprise for fine you here. You tell him you just come on de Grand Marais for little hunt."

"And what about you? They'll know you were here."

"Sure dey know! But I be gone. When dey hask where I go, you tell him de trut'; you don' know. Firs' t'ing dey do is get you back on Pointe Aux Barques. Den dey look for me. Well, de Grand Marais is big place for look."

Bruce still said no. It was not because he feared to go back.

"I know I did wrong," he said. "I know I should be punished. If I were sent to jail I could stand that. I couldn't stand being humiliated again—misunderstood."

Polean harangued him for another ten minutes. He got up then and without another word moved the table over beside the bed. On it he placed a bucket of fresh water, what remained of the *bouillon* and the jug of brandy.

"There," he said. "Now I mak' fire in the stove. Dey'll see the smoke an' know some wan is here. You can talk all you please, Bruce, but these tam' I am de boss! When de police come, you mak' no trouble. Don' say not'ing 'bout de money; jus' do what dey say. De big t'ing is for got you back on Pointe Aux Barques quick."

Bruce raised his tortured eyes to him.

"So it's as bad as that, eh? I suspected it was——"

"She's bad enough for you not to mak' damn fool of yourself," the big fellow answered gruffly. It was only a cloak to hide his emotion. "I keep my heye on these place all day. If police don' come—— I be back tonight. I t'row some grub in de canoe now."

Polean's devotion touched the boy, but he, too, masked his feelings with a taunt.

"That would be smart, wouldn't it? Do you think I want you to come back and walk into a trap?"

"I ain't worry 'bout no traps," Polean grumbled. "Honly t'ing I got hon my min' is your foots."

HE BUILT up the fire. It took him only a minute or two to toss into a duffle-bag the few things he would need. Beneath the shanty, shrouded in a waterproof tarp, was a sixteen-foot Peterborough canoe. It was swift and light and would take him wherever he cared to go.

Bruce had turned his face to the wall. Polean glanced at him. The shotgun leaned against the bunk. The big fellow picked it up. When he went out the gun went with him.

Presently he had the canoe in the water; his duffle stowed. He came to the door.

"Well, Bruce, I go now. Ever't'ing hall right?"

The boy choked back a sob. "As right as it ever will be," he murmured.

Polean La Flamme's eyes were misting.

"Why say dat?" he grumbled. "You going got well——"

"I was thinking of you," Bruce whispered. "I—I hope you make it, Polean ——"

A thousand times the big man had hidden heartbreak and chagrin with a laugh. He tried it now. It was only a rumble that died in his throat. This was good-bye, but he could not put it into words.

Slowly he closed the door and turned away. He was half a mile from the shanty before he dared to look back.

"Wan man mak' all these trouble," he growled. "He's dead, but de law ain't satisfied; she still try to mak' more trouble!"

SLOWLY the morning wore on. Black clouds began to pile up in the west. They were no darker than the thoughts of Polean La Flamme, waiting out the hours in his place of concealment less than a mile from the shanty. He had no iron bars to pen him in now, but he felt far more helpless than he had that day in his cell in the Pointe Aux Barques jail. In vain he listened for the put-put of an outboard motor or a glimpse of a distant canoe to assure him that the police were almost there.

Noon came, but on all that vast network of sluggish water and brown fen nothing moved; no paddle flashed.

Inexperienced as he was, he knew that Bruce Rennick's life was ebbing away with the passing minutes. Thinking he might have failed in his watching, he moved nearer the island until not half a mile separated him from the cabin.

Still he caught no signs of life. With growing desperation, he circled the place, keeping to cover as best he could. Neither on the beach, where he had landed the previous day, nor on the other side of the island, was there any sign of a strange canoe.

He recalled what Bruce had said about a trap. Maybe the police were stalking him even as he was watching for them.

"But *non*," he argued, "it can't be. I know de Grand Marais too well for dat!"

He found it equally hard to believe that the overturned canoe had satisfied such men as Inspector Tyrell and Sergeant McQuade that he had drowned in Lake Superior. Certainly one of them had been summoned to run him down. They were thorough men, not easily fooled.

In this he quite failed to realize that the storm lashing the lake that night had been of such violence as to almost preclude the possibility that any man could have weathered it. But had he realized it he still would have found it impossible to believe that they had turned back without searching the sand bar for some possible sign of him. Once on the bar, how could they have failed to find his tracks—the still warm stove in the twine-house?

It passed belief. A more plausible answer was that they had found evidence enough to convince them that he was on the marsh, but knowing it would take weeks to run him down, had returned to Pointe Aux Barques to provision and organize their man-hunt. The Mounted would proceed with the same thoroughness that characterized everything they did.

POLEAN mulled it over as he waited. It so satisfactorily explained why they had not come that he was almost convinced. But he could not be sure. Sergeant McQuade was a fox; he might be in the shanty now, waiting for him to break cover.

He lived through another hour of maddening inaction and suspense. With it went all sense of restraint and caution. With a sigh of relief he picked up the paddle and sent the canoe into the open, disdaining any further attempt at keeping to cover.

"If de police she's here, I fin' hout damn quick!" he muttered fiercely.

His own safety had come to mean little enough to him. He was determined that Bruce should not die without having a chance for his life, and the decision had dwarfed all else in his mind.

He prided himself on his ability to read sign. Half a minute after he had pulled his canoe out of the water he was convinced that no one had landed there in his absence. Chiding himself for the hours he had wasted, he ran to the shanty. A

cursory inspection of the tracks about the door showed them to be his own.

Certain though he was that he and Bruce were alone on the island, his eyes were keenly alert as he opened the door. A glance told him that only the boy was there.

Bruce did not look up as he entered. Indeed, he lay so still that Polean La Flamme's cheeks blanched with fear, afraid that he had returned to find him dead.

"Bruce——" he called anxiously.

Slowly the boy opened his eyes. His fever had risen with the passing hours. He was barely conscious. With an effort he recognized Polean. His chin quivered piteously as the big fellow bent over him.

"I—didn't want you to came back," he whispered slowly. "The police——"

"I'm sick wait for de police!" Polean sneered. "Such smart fellers, huh? Well, now I do somet'ing! I tak' you back myself!

A look of pain and horror clouded the boy's eyes.

"No use for you talk, Bruce," the big man exclaimed. "I know what you say. Not do no good these tam'. I put some blanket in de canoe and we go!"

"Please——" it was only a faint whisper. "Why do this? It's too late——"

"If he's too late, he's my fault! Can do what dey please wid me, but I tak' you back. In five minute we be hon our way."

IT WAS not his intention to return to Pointe Aux Barques by way of the sand bar and the lake. He knew he would be too late; Bruce would be past help by the time they reached their destination. Not over three hours of daylight remained. His thought was to cross the Grand Marais to the north, drag the canoe through the muskeg until he reached dry land, then portage across to the river, some distance below where the St. Michel came out of the chute at Thirty Mile.

At this time of the year it was impossible to ascend the St. Michel, but men had been known to descend it. It would be a dance with death. Still, it offered a chance. There was no chance the other way, if Bruce were to be saved.

With driving strokes he sent the stout canoe away from the island. He called into his service all his knowledge of the Grand Marais, using every channel that would save a yard. Bruce lay still in his blankets. Only Polean La Flamme's grunting as he drove the paddle home warned the wild fowl of their approach.

The hours passed, but there was no slackening of speed. His arms seemed to be made of steel. Bend, pull, a long follow through and the paddle reaching out again——

THE gray day waned. In the distance a loon called mournfully. Polean La Flamme crossed himself to ward off its evil omen. Ahead of him the weed-clogged sea stretched interminably. He did not lose heart. He knew that when darkness fell they would be at the portage.

The Grand Marais put out a long, ever-narrowing arm toward the river. Before another half-hour had passed, Polean knew they had entered it. The serrated ranks of spruce and fir came closer.

He glanced at Bruce. The boy was still alive. His eyes were sunken. His lips hung loosely over his teeth, as white as chalk. The big fellow sent a prayer winging away to heaven that he might not be too late.

There was no twilight at that time of the year. In another ten minutes it would be night. He would have only the pale light of the moon to guide him. He was picking his way carefully now, feeling out every opening. There was very little water under the canoe. He could put his paddle down and strike bottom.

Another three hundred yards and he could find no more open water. With a punt-pole he could have gone on. He knew it was time for him to go overboard.

It was no easy matter to quit the canoe without upsetting it. He was a big man, but he made it gracefully enough, sinking

to his waist in the black muck. The ice-cold water made his teeth chatter.

Soon he was pushing the canoe ahead of him. He had covered more than a quarter of a mile before he reached firmer bottom. Suddenly trees loomed black, directly ahead of him. He toiled on, unmindful of the cold.

At last his feet touched dry land. With a mighty heave he pushed the canoe out of the water and waded ashore. Wet as he was, he had no thought of tarrying there to dry himself. He'd light a fire and make Bruce as comfortable as he could. The firelight would keep any prowling animal away and also help him to locate the boy when he returned from toting the canoe to the river.

From where he stood to the St. Michel was a long half a mile. On a well-travelled portage the distance would have been nothing. Here there was not even a dim trail to follow; for in the course of a year not a dozen men crossed from the Grand Marais to the river. It was time it would take, not effort, that concerned him.

He began to look about for dry wood. The pale moonlight only made the shadows deeper among the trees. He had not taken a dozen steps when something dark barred his way. He thought it was the trunk of a fallen tree. He put out an exploring hand, thinking to vault over it. Instead, he froze in his tracks. The thing he had touched was the bottom of an overturned canoe! It was dry enough, but he could not say whether it had been out of the water only an hour or two or abandoned there, months back. Still, it was hardly the way of dwellers on the Grand Marais to leave a canoe to rot.

It was a thoroughly disquieting discovery. In the suddenness of it he had reached for Bruce's shotgun, forgetting that he was no longer trying to elude the police. Sight of the boy's face, white against the blankets, reminded him. He let the gun drop. If the police were here, all the better! They would have to help him carry Bruce to the St. Michel.

HE TRIED to search out the shadows as he straightened up. He could see nothing, but the feeling that he was being watched grew on him.

"Well, why you wait?" he growled. "You 'fraid for come and got me? I mak' no trouble."

"Put up your hands then," came the answer in French.

Something familiar about the voice struck the big fellow.

"Whose is dat?" he demanded.

"Baptiste Benet——"

"Ba'tiste?" His relief was evident. Surely he had nothing to fear from him. Baptiste Benet had been trapping on the big marsh for twenty years. "Bagosh," he laughed, "you give me big scare, hall right! I knew some wan was here; I t'ought she was de police."

Baptiste chuckled, too. "I was afraid you might think that. I didn't want you taking a shot at me."

He stepped out from behind a big spruce and walked toward the canoe. He was a grizzled veteran but still sturdy and robust as a man of forty.

"Who is that?" he demanded as he caught a glimpse of Bruce Rennick.

Polean quickly told him what he wanted him to know. The old man's eyes bulged with incredulity as he heard him out.

"But, Polean, you can't do that! There is half a dozen Mounted Police in Pointe Aux Barques! You must be mad!"

The big man motioned for him to follow and walked out of Bruce's hearing.

"Listen, Ba'tiste, dat boy she's dying. I tak' him back if dey was five t'ousand police dere. Don' waste no tam' talk 'bout dat. You got to help me. I tak' de canoe; you carry de boy. I'm going run de *rivière*."

Baptiste shook his head in eloquent despair.

"Now I know you are mad," he said. "The drive is over, but the river is full of logs. They are working out of the eddies. Every few minutes one shoots by. I crossed the marsh this morning for flour,

thinking if the St. Michel was not too high I'd try it. One look convinced me that the only way to get to Pointe Aux Barques alive was to wait for a log-train. Yet you would run it at night! You will never make it. You will be drowned before you've gone a mile!"

Polean knew the old man was not enlarging on the perilousness of the undertaking. But there was no alternative.

"I know she's bad; but I go jest de sam'," he answered resolutely. "Mebbe we mak' her. If we don' —well, for myself it don' matter so much; for him, she's a chance. De honly wan he's got, Ba'tiste. So we go. I carry de canoe; you tak' him."

Bruce opened his eyes protestingly when Polean forced a little brandy on him.

"Don' give hup, Bruce," he murmured encouragingly. "If we have little luck we be in Pointe Aux Barques pretty quick."

It was slow going through the woods, with only an occasional patch of moonlight to help them. The underbrush tripped the big fellow repeatedly, but he went on. They could hear the brawling St. Michel long before they saw it. Once in sight of it, Polean La Flamme did not pause until he had lowered the canoe at the river's edge.

The water broke white in the moonlight as it hurled itself at the submerged rocks which strewed the bank where they had come out. In mid-stream it raced along, dark and sullen in its wild flight to the lake.

Polean studied it intently. Even as he watched, a log shot past him. In a second it was gone.

Baptiste had seen it, too. "You know where you'll be if one of them happens to hit you," he warned. "I tell you, you are mad to try it!"

The big man met it with a laugh.

"I do lots of foolish t'ing in my life," he murmured stonily. "Mebbe I do these wan. If I keep hoff de bank I have a chance. Soon as she got beyond the Big Bend and began widen hout, she not be so bad."

HE BEGAN to search for a place from which to launch the canoe. A hundred yards upstream he found a spot free of rocks. It took only a few minutes to put Bruce in the canoe and carry it there. Between them they got the craft into the water. Baptiste braced himself to hold it as Polean got in and poised his paddle.

"You give me good shove now, Ba'tiste!" he called out.

The old man obeyed with a will. The canoe shot away from the bank. Before Baptiste could climb out of the water it was several hundred yards away, a bobbing speck riding the torrent.

Polean La Flamme did not glance back. The world was rushing at him, the trees that walled the river an indistinct blur. His ear drums ached as with the booming of a thousand guns. It was almost impossible to steer a course. Only by the patches of white water and blacker bulk of the rocky banks could he orient himself.

Something black shot across his path. He missed it by inches, recognizing it for a log flung out of an eddy. In a moment or two he was passing it, the light canoe fairly leaving the water as it raced onward.

He reached the Big Bend in full flight. The paddle was nearly wrenched out of his hands as he swung the canoe away from shore where the current was carrying him to destruction.

"By Gar, I t'ink de paddle crack dat tam'," he muttered. He drew a deep breath of relief as the strain on his arms and shoulders lessened momentarily.

He had told Baptiste that below the Big Bend the danger would not be so great.

The thought won a grim smile from him now. The St. Michel was wider, but the flood lost none of its speed. Worse still, the roaring of the river grew in violence, warning him that the ragged rocks of Limestone Crossing had snared the logs that had been released from the eddies above.

It was four miles from the Bend to the Crossing, but it seemed only a few seconds before the white water told him the rapids were just ahead. It gave him some idea of the speed with which he was travelling. It passed belief that wood and canvas could withstand that strain for long.

He looked ahead, straining his eyes in the darkness for sight of the jam. He sucked in his breath as he saw a great log rear out of the water like a giant snake to stand on end for a split second and then dive back into the froth. The big timbers hit head on with a dull thud that made the shadows tremble.

Closer to her shore the water was black, but it did not carry to him any promise of safety. He knew the crossing abounded with rocks from shore to shore. The submerged ones were just as dangerous as the sharp teeth in mid-stream. He'd have to strike just one to rip the bottom out of the canoe from stem to stern.

And yet, he had no choice. He had to get through that way or not at all. Huge hands gripping the paddle until his nails sunk into his flesh, he swung the frail craft toward the right bank.

For all his great strength and knowledge of the river he was as helpless as a blind man for a hundred yards. He knelt with shoulders hunched, tensing himself for the shock that would hurl him into the torrent.

He felt, rather than heard, the canoe slip over a hidden rock. It was as though a great piece of sand paper had been rubbed down its length. It was enough to start the seams. He glanced at the bottom, expecting to see it making water, but to his relief the craft remained as dry as ever.

HE WAS a quarter of a mile below the Crossing before he could fully realize that they had come through safely. He wanted to shout, to give voice to his elation, but his throat was so tight that only a strangled incoherent cry rumbled on his lips.

He looked at Bruce. The boy had not stirred. With an angry bellow Polean La Flamme put behind him the fear that the lad might be dead.

"No," he thought, "de good God is watching hout for him, or we don' get trough de Crossing tonight."

He knew he was still some miles from Pointe Aux Barques. And yet miles were only a matter of minutes at such speed. Out of the blackness the railroad bridge loomed darkly. It raced toward him. It was only a trestle laid on rock buttresses. The river was so high that the space between the water and the bridge seemed not over two feet.

The big fellow's jaws locked. There was no stopping, no turning back, no telling if they could get through until they had made it or the canoe had been smashed to kindling wood.

One place offered no better chance than another. Eyes unwavering, he held for the middle of the river. The bridge leaped at him. He lowered his head without releasing his grip on the paddle. The canoe shot under the tracks. He could have lifted a hand and touched the ties.

The St. Michel swung to the left. Far ahead he caught a glimpse of the flickering lights of Pointe Aux Barques.

Moments passed before he could realize the truth . . . that in some miraculous way he had run the river—saved Bruce Rennick's life.

The lights were nearer now. In a few seconds he could make out the mill and see the lights strung over the log basins.

He had just begun to breathe easier when his heart stood still. His eyes started from their sockets. Beyond the basins he had caught a glimpse of the boom which the Laurier Company, contrary to law, had

flung across the St. Michel from bank to bank in order to trap its logs and keep them from being swept out into the lake.

There was no way around it—no opening. The water was being churned to spray as it broke against it. He could see it rising into the air as the maddened river hurled itself furiously at the boom until it fell of its own weight.

Some men might have cursed, others prayed. Polean La Flamme only raged.

"So, it's for dis I run de *rivière,* eh? To be drown lak' rat, huh? *Non!* By Gar, *non!*" He glared at the St. Michel as though it had ears with which to hear. "I show you who is boss! I laugh at you yet!"

VI

THERE IS A TOMORROW

IAN MACMONNIES, outside night-boss for the Laurier Company, stood up in his little launch at the mouth of Number I basin and shielded his eyes with his hand against the glare of the lights overhead to stare with growing amazement at what he first thought was only a ghostly apparition—a canoe rushing toward him with the speed of a hawk.

It was a second or two before he could find his tongue. A cry boomed over the water from him then. The men in the basin stopped work and stared with him.

"A canoe!" they shouted. Some one had run the St. Michel! Here was something to be remembered. Their excitement soared. They were about to raise a cheer when suddenly they fell silent, a strange awe in their eyes.

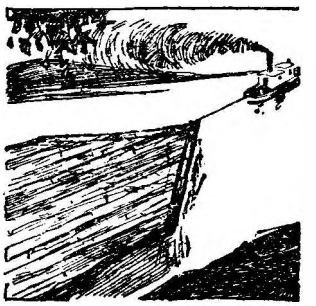
"The boom——" one groaned.

The other nodded. Instinctively the dullest among them sensed that in a few seconds the flying canoe must be dashed to pieces against the boom.

MacMonnies sensed it too. He glanced at the boom, rising black and wet above the water. His thin lips whitened. Nothing could be done to stay the inevitable now. A sort of paralysis gripped him. The canoe was within several hundred yards of him before he sprang to the controls and got the launch out of the way.

"It's La Flamme!" some one cried. "It's Polean La Flamme!"

Polean La Flamme? Running the river? Coming back to Pointe Aux Barques? MacMonnies looked again and knew it was so. His mouth fell open with fresh surprise.



The canoe was abreast the mill now. He could see the big Frenchman tensing himself, peering ahead, not varying his course an inch.

"But the fool knows the boom is there!" the night-boss groaned. "Why don't he do something?"

Men ran lightly across the bobbing logs in the basin, horror in their eyes.

"Look!" one cried shrilly.

Polean La Flamme had spun the canoe on its nose. As they held their breath it darted into the basin and circled round and round with decreasing momentum, missing the bobbing logs by inches.

MacMonnies rubbed a sleeve across his face. "Took nerve," he muttered, his throat dry. "Not another man on the river could have done it!"

In his admiration for what the man had done he forgot for the moment that La Flamme was an escaped prisoner, charged with the crime of murder. It was so with the others, too. They raised their voices in approval as he paddled across the basin to the wharf. MacMonnies gave the launch the gun and was soon alongside him.

"Nice work, La Flamme," he exclaimed. "Thought it was all over for a moment." He mopped his face again. "You must have been damned anxious to get back here. Can't understand it, with the town full of police looking for you."

POLEAN was on the wharf already, holding the canoe close. The Scot joined him. A light from above cast its rays on Bruce Rennick's wax-like face. The boy might have been dead, he lay so still.

"Hunh?" Questions leaped to MacMonnies' lips. The big fellow stilled them with a glance.

"Mac, you give me a hand," he ordered. "You hol' de canoe; I get him hout." The others ran to the wharf. As they reached it Polean straightened up with Bruce in his arms. He met them defiantly, a snarl of impatience on his lips.

"It's Bruce Rennick," they said among themselves. "You can see he is badly hurt."

It was enough to explain why Polean La Flamme had come back—why he had dared the river. Without knowing what had happened they still were able to surmise that the man had deliberately sacrificed himself for the boy.

MacMonnies put his hand on the big man's arm.

"I'm afraid they'll arrest you before you get very far, La Flamme. Is there anything I can do?"

"Doctor Porier, Mac! Don' lose no tam'. By Gar, if you ever hurry you run now! Tell him to come on M'sieu' Rennick's place quick!"

"Why sure—glad to—" He hesitated for a moment. "I'll get him if he's here."

Polean stared at him aghast. This was something he had not considered. Doctor Porier away? True enough, he often was absent from home, as usually is the case with a Northern doctor in a sparsely settled region whose practice calls him over a district that would make a comfortable county further south. But no, it could not be—not after what he had dared.

"He's got to be here tonight!" he ground out fiercely, as though defying MacMonnies to deny it. He knew Bruce was still alive, and with the proimse of help so near, he refused to believe that fate would snatch it away.

Hair matted, wild eyed, the muck of the marsh staining his clothes, he went down the main street of Pointe Aux Barques, holding Bruce in his arms as lightly as thought he were a babe.

People began to look at him. Yes, it was Polean La Flamme! The hour was not late. Men came to the doors of the stores and saloons to stare at him, their faces grotesque with surprise. Why had he come back? Was he mad? What was that he carried in his arms?

And now the whisper that he had returned ran ahead of him. Men spoke to him, but he went on, ever faster, until he was almost running. The police must not stop him now. Nothing must stop him until he had Bruce home and the doctor was there, fighting to save the boy's life. Then the police could have him.

He looked up. There was a light in the rooms over the magistrate's office. There were lights in the town-hall, too. He knew why. The police would be quartered there. The knowledge won a mocking laugh from him. He could fancy them sitting up, their heads together, worrying about where to look for him. It was something to make a man laugh. But the hoarse chuckle that rumbled to his lips was hardly the laughter of a sane man. The strain he had been under for hours had snapped even his great strength. The world had become a distorted thing—unreal, fantastic; an abyss in which rivers roared and white faces leered at him out of the darkness.

A DOZEN men ran along at his side, trying to get a word out of him, as he headed for the stairway that led to the second floor of Duncan Rennick's establishment.

A side window was thrown open and a man looked out. It was Duncan himself. He had heard the rush of feet, and thinking it was only another drunken brawl, ordered them to be gone.

The lower door stood closed. Someone opened it. Polean recognized little Remy Ledoux.

"Keep them back, Remy," he growled as they would have followed him up the stairs.

He kicked the upper door open. Before him stood Duncan Rennick, bristling with rage at this intrusion on his privacy. Whatever he had been about to say was dashed from his lips forever as he recognized Polean La Flamme. Pop-eyed he stared at him, his face the color of ashes.

"You—!" he got out finally, his voice breaking shrilly in the charged silence.

"Yes, she's me, hall right," the big man rasped unpleasantly. "I come back. You not need to shake so, hold man; I not hurt you." He closed the door behind him with his foot. Then he pushed the blanket away from Bruce's face. "You see what I got, huh? I bring him back to you——"

It was almost too much for the old Scot. He clutched his heart and swayed drunkenly for seconds. Only one word could he force to his lips.

"Dead——?"

The iron in him ran away like the sand out of an hour-glass. His anguish did not melt the heart of Polean La Flamme.

"Non, he's not dead." His tone was bitterly accusing. "You not have to blame yourself for dat. She's bad enough you mak' him steal."

"Don't say that—I didn't know," the father sobbed.

"Bagosh, you know now! Where is his bed? Doctor Porier be here quick."

Duncan Rennick fell to his knees and beseeched his son to open his eyes when Polean placed the boy on the bed.

"Bruce——" he pleaded again and again. "My son—"

The boy had lapsed into unconsciousness. Polean felt his heart and told himself he had not come too late; the doctor would save him.

Utterly crushed, old Duncan raised his eyes to the man beside him.

"I'll never forget that you brought him back, Polean. I'll do all I can to help you——"

"Don' worry 'bout me. I do this for him —not for you!"

THERE was a sound of footsteps on the stairs. They recognized the doctor's voice. MacMonnies was with him. Doctor Porier asked them to step outside while he examined the boy.

They went back to the front room. The big fellow stood at the open window, breathing deeply of the cool breeze off the lake. Below him the water in the slip lapped against the piling. The boy's father paced the floor endlessly. Bit by bit he drew the story of what had happened from La Flamme; how he had found Bruce; what he had done for him; the wild dash across the Grand Marais; the mad ride down the St. Michel.

Duncan Rennick was reduced to a humbled and bewildered silence. Even as he continued to pace the floor, his eyes ever on the bedroom door, he was forced to admit that only now was he beginning to know Polean La Flamme. MacMonnies could only stare at the big fellow, a great wonder in his eyes.

"It is a man we have here," he said. "It's a pity to think of throwing the likes of him into jail. God knows the police must be here in a minute. You say the word, La Flamme, and I'll help you, even now, to get away."

The big fellow gave no sign that he had heard. He was gazing across the slip at the front room of the town-hall. He could see four scarlet-coated men gathered about a table, poring over a map.

Old Duncan had heard, however. "That would not be helping him," he said. "I'll do all I can for this man, but I can't help him to escape."

Before MacMonnies could reply, the bedroom door opened and Doctor Porier joined them.

"It is bad," he murmured. "I'll have to amputate part of the foot. But he is young; he will live. I'll need Father Despard to help me with the anesthetic."

"You sure he going got well?" Polean questioned hopefully.

"It'll be a hard fight; but he should make

it. These Scots take a great deal of dying before they're dead."

Some one ran up the stairs. MacMonnies leaped to the door as the man on the outside would have opened it.

"Who is it?" he demanded.

"Constable MacCloud," the other answered loudly enough for all to hear. "Open that door! I'm coming in!"

MacMonnies did not budge. His eyes went to Polean La Flamme.

"The window—it's your only chance," he whispered excitedly.

THE dazed look in the big man's eyes deepened. He had not thought to escape, but now that Bruce was in the doctor's hands and the police were at the door, he did not know what to do.

The magistrate misunderstood his indecision. He rushed at him, thinking to hold him back. "Don't be a fool!" he cried. "I tell you to stay and take your chance with the law!"

It was an unfortunate word, coming just then, and it put Polean La Flamme on the defensive instantly with its promise of steel bars, a prison cell, men dragging from him the secret he was not yet ready to divulge. He slapped the magistrate's hand off his arm and leaped to the window, a hunted man again.

The water was only a few feet below. They had not caught him yet. With an animal-like grunt he gathered himself together and plunged headlong into the slip.

It was dark down there. Under water he reached the pilings and struck out with long strokes for the end of the wharf. "Where is he?" Constable MacCloud demanded as he burst into the room.

He drew his belt-gun as he saw the open window.

"I didn't think the Mounted went in for shooting unarmed men," MacMonnies growled.

"There won't be any shooting if it can be avoided," the constable retorted. "I could have grabbed him right here if you'd let me in. Now I may have to wing him. I'm not going to let him get away again."

Although he couldn't see La Flamme he ordered him to surrender. His cries reached his brother officers. They ran into the street.

MacMonnies opened another window and leaned out. "Where's Inspector Tyrell?" he shouted.

"Telegraph office," a constable answered. "What's up?"

"Better get him," Mac advised. La Flamme was not to be seen.

"I hope he makes it," he muttered grimly. "He's got the piling between him and you, MacCloud. You'll never get him from here."

"There's a light at the end of the wharf," MacCloud answered. "He'll have to show himself to get out of the slip. I'll stop him then."

MacMonnies saw his arm tense a second later. Constable MacCloud was about to fire when the door flew open and Inspector Tyrell dashed in.

"Wait!" he cried, knocking the gun down.

Eyes snapping angrily, MacCloud turned on his superior officer.

"Now he's gone, Inspector!" he exclaimed. "A clean getaway!"

"Well, let him go," Tyrell answered. "I'm glad I got here in time." He turned to the magistrate. "I was over filing a wire when I heard that La Flamme had come back," he explained. "There was a message there for me." He had it in his hand. "It will surprise you. I'm glad to say that La Flamme had nothing to do with the murder. Dolan was killed by a man named François Larocque."

"What?" old Duncan gasped. "Azalma's father?"

"Yes. Evidently you understand the reason for the crime. It seems this man Larocque has been sick for months. Ap-

parently he kept himself alive with the thought that he must come back here and avenge his daughter. He died in a hospital in Sault Ste. Marie this evening. Before he passed away he made a statement. Unless you want to hold La Flamme for breaking jail, I'll call my men off."

As magistrate and factor Duncan Rennick had always held the law inviolate, but he could not forget what Polean La Flamme had done for him.

"The charge will never be pressed, Inspector. You must let La Flamme know he is a free man."

Inspector Tyrell spoke briefly to Constable MacCloud. The man hurried out. Doctor Porier turned to MacMonnies.

"Mac, will you come with me? While you are getting Father Despard I'll get what I need at my office. We shouldn't waste any time."

MACMONNIES signified his willingness, and they left together. Inspector Tyrell took a chair facing the magistrate. The old Scot was a badly shaken man.

"Inspector," he said, "with the information you have, is it possible for you to reconstruct the crime?"

"Easily enough. La Flamme drew a herring across the trail that fooled us, but the crime itself was ordinary enough. Larocque came north and waited for his chance. It was simple enough for him to get into the shanty at Thirty Mile. He confessed that after he had killed Dolan he awakened La Flamme and told him what he had done; that he had only two or three weeks to live and would be dead before the law caught up with him. Remembering their great friendship for each other, you can surmise what happened. La Flamme went in where the dead man lay and waited to be caught; deliberately taking the crime on his own shoulders—or pretending to—in order that his friend might escape."

"Then why did he break out of jail?" Duncan demanded. "He knew he was innocent; the truth must have come out at his trial."

The Inspector shook his head. "No, Duncan, I'm afraid you do not understand the *habitant* mind as well as you once did. He'd had time to think things over. He'd seen you and many others accept the proof of his guilt as conclusive. The Curé has told us how he spoke to La Flamme, reminding him how tight the web of evidence against him appeared. I imagine he began to feel that instead of merely giving his friend a chance to escape, he had convicted himself—unless he chose to talk. You've seen enough of the man tonight to know to what lengths he will go for a friend. Talk was the last thing he wanted. To make sure that the truth would not be dragged out of him before he was ready to voice it, he broke jail."

Duncan nodded. The doctor seemed to be a long time coming. "You make it sound very plausible, Inspector," he murmured absent-mindedly. "It's easy enough to understand——"

"All but one thing, Duncan."

"And that?"

"Well, the authorities at the Soo checked on Larocque's story. They found he had been penniless in Detroit for several months. Where did he get the money to bring him here? It must have cost him almost a hundred dollars."

A hundred dollars! Duncan Rennick's eyes became veiled with a great secret. Light was breaking on him. He had only to remember Bruce's fondness for François Larocque's daughter to understand it all. Head throbbing, he got to his feet. The doctor and the others were on the stairs. Suddenly he faced Tyrell.

"I can explain that, Inspector," he volunteered. "I'm afraid I've been very stupid not to connect certain things. My son was very fond of Azalma Larocque . . . François knew it. He wrote to me. I—I loaned him a hundred dollars."

SAND

By JAMES B. HENDRYX

Author of "The White River Derelict," "Flat Creek Murder," etc.

His cronies thought Klondike Lafe might learn to lay off chechakos.

IT WAS, perhaps, the only unselfish impulse in the life of Sid Logan—the impulse that caused him to leap into the turgid waters of the Yukon and rescue big Lafe Lalonde from drowning.

Sweeping out of Indian River, Lafe's canoe struck a sawyer and overturned just as the boat manned by Logan and three other chechakos barged past. Struggling helplessly, the big man disappeared beneath the surface, and, pausing only to throw off his heavy coat, Sid Logan dived, to reappear a moment later with a firm grip on the man's coat collar. A few yards farther down he landed and drew the half-drowned man from the water where he lay coughing and retching while Logan stood in his dripping clothing, shook his fist, and hurled obscene curses and threats after the boat-load of his own companions which was disappearing downriver.

Struggling to a sitting posture, big Lafe blinked and clawed the water from his eyes and beard with his fingers. "I'm obliged to you," he choked, when the other paused for breath.

"The hell you are!" chattered Logan, as the cold wind whipped about his dripping clothing. "You ought to be. You'd be dead by now, if I hadn't pulled you out."

"But—where'd you come from?" Lafe asked, blinking toward the river whose surface was dotted with the rude boats of the chechakos.

The man pointed to a speck, far downriver. "Out of that boat. We were going past when you tipped over. I'll hammer hell out of those yellow pups when I catch up with 'em!"

"The hull country," growled Lafe, "is gittin' lousy with chechakos. Only, mostly, they don't 'mount to nothin'. They ain't got no sand, like you."

"Sand?"

"Yeah—sand—nerve. Like you jumpin' in the river to pull me out, an' threatenin' to hammer hell out of them others fer not landin'. That takes sand."

"Might's well have let you drown as freeze to death," grumbled the other, sourly. "I'll be froze stiff in five minutes; or else die of pneumonia."

For answer, Lafe pointed to an eddy a few yards below, where an overturned canoe floated lazily, now and then rubbing the bank. "There's my canoe. There'll be dry matches in a bottle."

It was but the work of a few minutes to drag the dugout from the water and remove the pack which had been lashed to a thwart, together with an ax, and a rifle. Soon, in the shelter of a brush thicket, the two stripped beside a roaring fire, wrung out their clothing, and spread it to dry upon a rude rack that Lafe contrived.

"A big drink of liquor would go good," opined Logan, hugging the fire, his naked body lobster-red from the heat of the flames.

"Yeah," agreed Lafe, "but we ain't got none. We'll be in Dawson tonight."

THE trip downriver was uneventful, and because birds of a feather are wont to flock together, upon reaching Dawson Sid Logan gravitated to the Klondike Palace, a notorious saloon, dance-hall, and gambling joint, much frequented by chechakos and tin-horns, and by certain other characters to whom honest toil was mere hearsay. There, under the tolerance, and many affirmed the connivance, of the proprietor, one Cuter Malone, the drunken and the unwary were more likely than not to be separated from their possessions.

Lafe Lalonde repaired to the Tivoli where over numerous glasses of whisky he recounted his accident and rescue to his cronies.

Lalonde was something of an enigma. A sourdough of the sourdoughs, he had, by common report, drifted in over the mountains from the Mackenzie River country. When Carmack's strike on Bonanza sent all Fortymile stampeding upriver, Lafe Lalonde had been in the van of the stampeders. He had filed numerous claims on creeks that were later to become famous gold producers. But he had worked none of them, being content to sell out to the highest bidder in those early days of feverish speculation in claims. Lafe Lalonde never filed a claim that hadn't a chance; nor did he ever hold out the possibilities of a claim as an inducement to its purchase. His unvaried sales talk had become a by-word in the North: "She might go a million—an' she mightn't pay wages. Take it er leave it."

"What was you doin' up Indian River way?" asked Camillo Bill. "Ain't the Klondike country good enough fer you no more?"

"Too many chechakos. Too many claims," replied Lafe. "I like elbow room."

"What's she like up there?" asked Moosehide Charlie.

"Not so good. They'll take a ton out of the Klondike fer every ounce they take out of Indian River. I got one location, though, that I'm goin' to record in the mornin'. Then mebbe I'll settle down an' work it."

The atmosphere suddenly became tense with expectancy. The listeners gathered closer, as into the mind of each leaped thought of the rich claims this man had recorded and sold. Now—if he had struck one that he was actually going to work! Each had visions of stampeding to the Indian River country, and socking in his stakes beside Lafe's.

"What you got—another Bonanza?" asked Swiftwater Bill in a husky whisper.

Lalonde laughed. "No, boys—nothin' like that. She's only a pocket, where an old crick used to run crossways."

Old Bettles chuckled tipsily. "I s'pose 'she might go to a million—an' she

mightn't pay wages. Take it er leave it'," he quoted. "What'll you take fer a half-interest?"

Lafe shook his head. "There ain't no part of her fer sale, boys. I've got me a pardner, an' I figger on workin' the claim."

"Who's yer pardner, Lafe?" asked Camillo Bill.

"Sid Logan, his name is—the chechako that dove in an' drug me out of the river. He don't know it yet. But one good turn, as the feller says, deserves another. He claims he's a gambler. But hell, that ain't no business fer a man to be in! He's liable to lose everything he's got but his pants."

"Them gamblers is generally crooks," reminded Swiftwater Bill. "You better keep yer eyes open, er he'll skin you clean. I wouldn't trust one of 'em the len'th of an ax handle."

Lafe grinned. "I ain't no gambler, an' if I tried to beat him at his own game, I'd be a damn fool. Likewise, he ain't no miner; an' if he tried to beat me at my game, he'd be the damn fool."

NEXT day Lafe hunted up Sid Logan at the Klondike Palace. At first glance he failed to recognize the man who stood at the bar and gingerly eased a drink of whisky between puffed lips. A purple swelling completely closed one eye, and as he focused the other upon Lalonde, his lips twisted into a distorted grin.

"Hello," he invited. "Have a drink!"

"Looks like, mebbe, you'd ketched up with yer pals," remarked Lafe, eyeing the battered face as he filled his glass.

"I'll say he did!" exclaimed Cuter Malone, from behind the bar. "Last night, it was. The three of 'em stood here at the bar, an' he come in. By cripes, he had a chair busted over their head before they could git started!"

"Looks like anyways one of 'em got started," observed Lafe, his smile widening.

"Yeah, two of 'em did, after the chair busted," admitted Malone, "But he polished them off with the back."

"You've got sand," affirmed Lafe, eyeing Logan approvingly. "How'd you like to go pardners on a good location?"

"What d'you mean—location?" asked Logan. "Gambling layout?"

"No. Minin' location. A claim."

"You mean, take a shovel and try to find gold, digging in the ground? Not me!"

"I jest recorded a good location that I'm goin' to work, an' I'm lettin' you in."

The other shook his head. "No—I'll take a chance on the cards. I——"

He was interrupted by Cuter Malone, who was eyeing Lalonde narrowly. "How come yer lettin' this stranger in, if yer claim's so damn good?"

"'Cause he saved my life. I'm payin' him back by lettin' him in on what I think is the best claim I ever located. I panned ten ounces out of the grass-roots between sun-up an' dark."

Malone's eyes widened. "The hell you did!" he cried, then with a glance at the puffed lipped gambler, he hastened to add, "You've give him his chance, an' he turned it down. He says he don't want in on it. Let me in! Name yer figger fer a half interest—twenty-five thousan'? Fifty thousan'? The dust's right there in the safe. By God, I know you know claims!"

Sid Logan's good eye shifted coldly from one to the other, and his puffed lips twisted into the semblance of a sneer. "What's this?" he asked. "A come-on game? D'you think I was made in a minute? How much did you figure you could take me for? Your work's too coarse, guys. I've be'n working games like that all my life. You'll have to think up a new one, or try it on someone else."

"What d'you mean?" asked Lalonde, a puzzled expression in his eyes.

Malone laughed. "He thinks we're tryin' to put one over on him. An', it does look like a set-up, at that—you comin' with yer story of a rich claim, an' me boostin' in with a hell of a price fer a half-interest."

LALONDE turned to the other. "I ain't askin' you to put up a cent. I'm lettin' you in, full pardners, on a damn good claim because you drug me out of the river. If you don't want it, all right. I'll keep the whole claim. I ain't sellin' no half-interest."

"All I got to say—I wisht it was me drug you out of the river," growled Malone, as he mopped at an imaginary spot with a bar-rag.

"I'll take a chance," said Logan, after a moment's hesitation. "But mind you, I ain't puttin' up a damn dollar. An' if you try any monkey work, I'm heeled."

"Come on then," said Lalonde. "Let's git agoin'."

Arriving at the claim, Lafe Lalonde stretched his arms widely. "A man's got elbow room here," he said, breathing deeply of the spruce-scented air.

"It's going to be lonesome as hell, with just us two," replied the other. "What's a man going to do nights?"

"Sleep," grinned Lalonde. "Wait till we get agoin', an' you won't need no one to tell you what to do nights. Minin's hard work."

"It better pay big, if you expect me to stay at it. A man's a damn fool to kill himself working. There's plenty of other ways to get money. It's like old Barnum said—there's a sucker born every minute."

"I like to git mine out of the ground," replied Lafe. "Come on—we might 's well be gittin' at it."

Reluctantly the man complied, and by evening a small gravel dump had been thrown up beside an embryo shaft. Eagerly he watched the results of the test panings, and greedily his eyes dwelt upon the yellow grains that Lafe removed from the bottom of the pan, and weighed on the gold scales.

"It's a hell of a lot of work," he complained that evening, as Lafe turned the salt pork sizzling in the pan. "My legs and arms ache like a toothache, and my back's so damn stiff I feel like I'm breaking in two every time I move."

Lafe laughed. "Yer soft," he said. "A week from now them aches will all be gone. When yer muscles gits broke in you'll be tired at night—but that jest makes a man sleep good."

ALL through the short summer the two worked, sluicing out their dumps, and filling little moosehide sacks with dust and coarse gold which they cached in a crevice in the rockwall, screened by a thicket close to the cabin.

In early September they hit bed-rock, and Lafe noted the sparkle of avarice in his partner's eyes as they weighed the final clean-up, and figured that they had forty-eight thousand dollars in the cache.

As Lafe had predicted, Logan's muscles had hardened, but the man never ceased to complain of the loneliness of the isolated creek, nor did he hesitate to express his dread of the coming winter.

After supper on the evening of the final clean-up, the gambler took a deck of cards from the clock shelf and, seating himself at the table, idly riffled the pasteboards with his fingers.

"Forty-eight thousand in gold," he gloated. "Hell—that's more than a man could carry!"

"Yeah," agreed Lafe, filling his pipe, and leaning his elbows on the table, "it would be clost to two hundred pound. A man wouldn't want to pack it very far. We'll divide it up, tomorrow, an' take it down to Dawson an' deposit in some of them safes. We've got to lay in our winter's supplies, an' I'm kind of feelin' fer a little spree. We've be'n out quite a while."

"I'll say we have!" agreed the other. "How about a little game of stud—jest the two of us, among friends?"

Lafe pondered the proposition. "No,"

he said at length, "I guess not. You're a gambler; an' I ain't. I'm a miner. I'd be a fool to try to beat you at your own game; jest the same as you'd be a fool to try to beat me at mine."

Logan flushed. "Do you mean you think I'm crooked—that I'd cheat you?"

"Well—you might; an' you mightn't. I do'no. Anyways, you'd be in shape to. Gamblin's your game." Lafe paused and puffed thoughtfully at his pipe. "You'd ruther put in the winter playin' cards," he said, "an' I'd ruther put it in minin'. I jest be'n figgerin' that there ain't no reason why we shouldn't both do like we want to do. We kin divide the dust, an' your share ort to stake you to playin' cards all winter around Dawson. You kin hire a man to work up here with me, an' I'll keep on workin' the claim."

THE other was silent for a long time. Finally he shook his head. "No, I'll come back. I'd rather be here an' help watch the dust."

It was Lafe's turn to flush angrily. "You mean you think I'd cheat you?"

" 'You might; an' you mightn't'," quoted Logan, with a grin. "You'd be in shape to —just like you said about me. Mining's your game."

"Guess it's about six of one of us, an' half a dozen of t'other," grinned Lafe. "Let's roll in. We'll be wantin' an early start in the mornin'."

With the outfits in the canoe the following morning, Lafe turned toward the cache. "I'll git the dust," he said.

Logan demurred. "Listen, Lafe! I was thinkin' last night—we're damn fools to load that stuff in that canoe. Suppose she'd tip over? Our whole summer's work would go to the bottom like a shot."

"A polin' boat would be better," agreed Lafe. "But we ain't got none."

"Why not leave the dust here? No one'll come along. An' if they did, they'd never find the cache. We'll bring in our supplies in a poling boat, and take the gold out in her next spring. Hell—we don't need it in Dawson! You've got dust in the Tivoli safe. And I've got a roll."

"Might be the best way," agreed Lafe. "I'd hate fer to lose all that dust."

They took their places in the canoe, and all that day, and the next, as they paddled downriver, Lafe's eyes were fixed speculatively on his partner's back.

"When do you figger on hitting back for the claim?" asked Logan, as the two beached the canoe on the Dawson waterfront in the early evening of the second day.

"Well," considered Lafe, "that's accordin'. Three, four days—mebbe five, six."

"Suppose we say six days, then," suggested Logan. "That'll give me a chance to get in a little card playing. That roll of mine craves action. Where you heading for, now?"

"Up to the Tivoli an' hunt up some of the sourdoughs. I'd like fer to be gittin' on with my drinkin'. Come on up an' meet the boys."

The other shook his head. "Every man to his own game. Mine's cards. I'll go on down to Cuter Malone's and start my roll to working."

ON FRONT STREET they parted, Lafe crossing to the Tivoli, while Logan kept on toward Malone's Klondike Palace farther down the street. In a deep shadow beside the A. C. Store, Lafe paused, removed his cap, and thoughtfully scratched his head. "He'd ort to stuck to his own game," he muttered. "He's a damn fool to think he kin beat me at mine. Here's where I git drunk in a hell of a hurry."

Entering the Tivoli, he surged to the bar with a loud-bawled invitation for all and sundry to join him in a drink. "Come on, you gamblers, an' fiddlers, an' piano players, an' bums! Crowd up, you sourdoughs, an' chechakos, an' ladies, an' gents, an' all others! I'm buyin' a drink—an' I ain't drinkin' alone! An' if there's anyone I fergot to mention, he kin come, too!" Turning to the barkeeper as the crowd surged

to the bar, he called, "Toss me a sack out of the safe, Curley—an' set out the bottles! I'm a wolf from the high hills, an' it's my night to howl!"

Laughingly and boisterously they drank and subsided from the bar, leaving Lafe with a half-dozen of the old-timers.

Old Bettles ordered a round. "What you celebratin'?" he asked, with a grin. "Jest the common event of hittin' camp? Er might it be yer birthday, er somethin'?"

For answer, Lafe turned to the bartender. "Bettles' dust ain't no good. I'm buyin' another. This here's a sourdough round—an' shove me a beer glass fer to pour my licker in! I'm way behind with my drinkin'."

They drank, Lafe filling a beer glass from the bottle, and tossing it off.

"You won't be behind long, if you keep that lick up," grinned Moosehide Charlie. "What's the big idee?"

"I'm celebratin' a strike! Yes, sir—the best damn claim in the hills!"

"How's yer pardner makin' out?" asked Bettles. "Us boys, we didn't like his looks much. We figgered, mebbe, he'd try to beat you out of the claim."

"Oh, no. He admits he's honest as necessary. An' I guess he's right."

"Didn't you fetch the dust down?" asked Moosehide.

"No, we left it up in the cache. He figgered the canoe might tip over an' spill it in the river. It might, at that—so I let him have his way. We kin fetch it out in the winter on a sled, er next spring in a polin' boat."

"Where'n hell's he at?" asked Camillo Bill abruptly. "You didn't leave him up there with the dust, did you?"

"No, he come on down. He wouldn't stay up there alone. Claims it's lonesome. He's over to the Klondike Palace givin' his roll a play. He had about four thousan' in bills."

"Jest the same," cautioned old Bettles, wagging his head knowingly, "if I was you, I'd keep my eye on that hombre. You can't never trust no chechako—an' especially no tin-horn gambler."

IT WAS very apparent that Lafe Lalonde was feeling his liquor. He laughed loudly and inanely, as though at a huge joke. "Thash ri', Bettlsh! Can't trush no chachakosh—no tin-hornsh, neither. But you got him wrong. Shid Logansh all ri'. Got a lot of shand—shometime you'll know hesh got lot of shand. Every man to hish own game—thash me! I'm gittin' drunker'n hell. Goin' to hunt up shomeplash an' take me a li'l shleep. Gi'me couple quartsh fer eye-opener."

"Go down to my shack, Lafe," invited Camillo Bill.

"Mine, either," offered Moosehide Charlie. "You'll be all right in a little bit."

A quart bottle grasped by the neck in either hand, Lafe regarded the sourdoughs with swaying gravity. "No shanks—shanks, I mean. I'm goin' shleep long time. Don' wan' be bothered. Drunk ash hell, an' tired ash hell—thash me! Goin' take good long shleep. I know shack where you can't fin' me an' wake me up, 'fore I'm ready. Sho long. She you later."

Drunkenly the man reeled toward the door, swinging the whisky bottles about like a pair of Indian clubs.

"Never seen Lafe git so damn drunk so quick," grinned Bettles.

"Cripes, he was drinkin' it out of a beer glass," said Swiftwater Bill. "What d'you expect?"

When the Tivoli door closed behind him, Lafe, grinning broadly, made his way swiftly and with no trace of drunkenness to a shack on the waterfront, to be greeted

in answer to his knock, by a leather-faced Indian who stood regarding him intently from the inner blackness.

Words passed between them, and a few moments later, the two made their way to the river, stepped into a canoe, and headed up the Yukon. Under the paddles of the two experts, the light craft fairly shot over the water, and soon the lights of Dawson were far astern. At daylight, they paused for a brief rest and a snack of cold moosemeat. Just before dark, they landed at the little shack on Lafe's claim.

"We made damn good time," approved Lafe. "You go ketch you a little sleep. We'll be headin' back in an hour."

When the Indian had disappeared within the shack, Lafe procured a moosehide, cut it in two with his knife, and, hurrying to the cache, set to work emptying the gold from the little sacks onto the two pieces of moosehide. When he had finished, he tied the dust into two bundles, and one at a time carried the hundred pound burdens to a point some distance up the creek. Here he cached them under the loose rock of a talus.

Returning to the cache, he hurriedly refilled the little sacks with sand, and carefully returned them to their accustomed place, leaving the cache exactly as he had found it.

Snatching a hasty lunch, he awoke the Indian, and once again embarked in the canoe. All night the two paddled furiously by the light of the moon and stars, and a few hours after daylight, landed before the Indian's shack and slipped in unobserved. Throwing themselves upon a bunk, they slept the sleep of profound exhaustion.

IT WAS dark when Lafe awoke. Leaving the native asleep, he stole out of the shack, and proceeded to the Tivoli, where the sourdoughs greeted him with broad grins.

"Did you sleep it off, Lafe?"

"You sure took yer time at it!"

"How you stackin' up?"

Lafe managed a wry grin. "Feelin' like hell, boys. Got a good long sleep—but I'm feelin' like hell. What I need's a li'l drink."

"Where's yer pardner?" asked Camillo Bill. "I'm like Bettles. I don't trust him, much."

"Oh, Sid's all right—got plenty of sand—you'll see. Hell—he jumped in an' drug me out of the river! An' he up an' knocked hell out of them three that run off an' left us."

"Yeah," agreed Moosehide deprecatively, "but if I was you, I'd be worryin' about that cache. How do you know that hombre ain't be'n up there an' raided it? It's damn near an even bet that you'll find it empty when you git back."

"Oh, Sid wouldn't raid the cache," replied Lafe. "Hell—it's half his!"

"Some folks," snorted old Bettles, "is so plumb simple-minded they're dumb! Fill up. I'm buyin' a drink."

Lafe Lalonde swallowed his liquor, and as he watched the others down theirs, he grinned.

ON THE morning of the seventh day after their arrival in Dawson, the two partners loaded their supplies into a poling boat, and with the canoe trailing behind, headed upriver. Four days later, they landed at the claim.

"Let's have a look at the cache," suggested Logan eagerly. "It isn't likely anyone has been here, but just the same I couldn't help worrying about it while we were gone."

"I didn't worry none," said Lafe. "There couldn't no one find it. An', there's plenty more in the gravel, if they did."

"But hell—man! Forty-eight thousand is a lot of money! I'd follow the man that lifted it half way round the world. And, believe me, when I caught up with him, I'd sure clean his clock!"

"I don't go much on fightin'," admitted Lafe. "Take me now—I s'pose I'd let him have it, an' go ahead an' dig me some more."

Parting the bushes, the two moved aside the rock that blocked the entrance to the tiny cave, and peered in. There, against the rockwall, was the tier of little moose-hide sacks, just as they had left them. Lafe noted that Logan's eyes devoured them greedily.

"They're here," breathed the gambler, with such evident relief that Lafe grinned. "By God, nobody better bother 'em! Shove that rock back—someone might be watching!"

As Lafe replaced the rock, his brows drew into a puzzled frown. He had expected to find the cache empty, had reasoned that the other's excuse for leaving the gold in the cache had been framed so that he could slip back and get it while he, Lafe, was carousing in Dawson. But here was the cache, just as he, himself, had left it. Could it be possible that Sid Logan was on the level? Could he have been wrong in his estimate of the man? And were the sourdoughs all wrong? Close association with Logan had convinced Lafe that he was no more nor less than a cheap crook—a tin-horn. But—with the cache intact, Lafe admitted to himself that he wasn't sure. "Hell," he muttered, "all us old-timers can't be wrong!" And with the rock in place, he followed the other to the poling boat.

THAT evening, with the supper dishes out of the way, Lafe got out a moose-hide, put some sinew to soak, and settled down to fashion a supply of the little gold sacks.

Logan seemed restless. He moved aimlessly about the room, rearranged the blankets on his bunk, the dishes on their shelves. From outside came a slight sound, and the next instant the door crashed inward and two men stood on the threshold with levelled revolvers.

"Stick 'em up!" The sharp command bit viciously.

Logan whirled with an oath, and diving, grasped the shorter of the two about the middle and crashed to the floor. At the same instant, the taller of the two fired from the doorway, and Lafe felt the wind of the bullet as it clipped a lock of hair just above his ear. With a kick he overturned the table, plunging the room into blackness from which came sounds of heavy breathing and grating curses from the two who grovelled on the floor. In the intense darkness, Lafe crawled swiftly across the floor and dived through the doorway, upsetting the tall man, who fired four rapid shots after him.

From a nearby place of concealment in the thick scrub, Lafe listened to the sounds of terrific combat within the cabin, where shouts and loud-bawled curses mingled with the rattle of tinware, and the crashing of bunk poles.

A form glided past, vague and indistinct, but recognizable in the thin starlight, as the taller of the two invaders. Straight toward the clump of bushes at the foot of the rockwall it sped, and during a momentary lull in the turmoil from the shack, Lafe distinctly heard a grating sound, as the man removed the stone from the mouth of the cache.

A moment later, the form emerged from the thicket, and made off toward the creek. Again it returned to the cache—and again—while from the shack, the sounds of battle redoubled in fury.

STRAINING his eyes, Lafe saw the figure move swiftly from the creek to the shack. There was a moment or two of titanic struggle, then a string of oaths and curses from the lips of Sid Logan that

must have carried to the utmost reach of the little valley. The tirade ended in a

series of curious muffled sounds, followed by silence, as two shadowy forms emerged from the shack and sped swiftly toward the creek. A moment later Lafe caught the vague silhouette of a canoe on the faintly star-lit water. Then the sound of dipping paddles—and silence.

Wriggling from his hiding place, Lafe walked toward the clump of bushes, dropped to his knees, and inserted an exploratory arm into the cache. It was empty. A slow grin overspread his face as he rose to his feet and gazed toward the little shack, standing dark and silent in the starlight.

"Robbed," he muttered under his breath. "Thirty-eight little moosehide sacks gone plumb to hell. It's a good thing I started to make some more."

Seating himself on the rude flume, he spent a good ten minutes in silent contemplation of the stars, and the dim contour of the valley rims. Then very deliberately he stood up and walked slowly toward the shack.

"Sid!" he called. "Oh, Sid!" Receiving no answer, he stepped closer and tried again. "Hey, Sid! Y'all right, Sid? They've gone, Sid. I seen 'em." Still no answer and very cautiously he approached the doorway where he paused to listen. A slight sound reached his ears. "Y'in there, Sid? The question was hardly more than a whisper.

The answer was a peculiar gagging, choking sound, and the sound as of a body writhing upon the floor. Lafe struck a match and peered in to see Sid Logan lying trussed like a roast turkey with coil after coil of babiche line. A heavy scarf was tied tightly about his face, effectively closing his mouth. Stepping over the body, Lafe lighted a candle, righted the table, and set the light on it. Then he set about releasing his partner who, from the moment the gag was removed, began to heap curses upon him.

"I ain't got no appetite fer fightin'," admitted Lafe mildly. "Hell—we might of got shot!"

"Got shot! Of course we might have got shot! But if you'd stayed and done your part, we'd have 'em both tied up right now—just like they had me! I had my man licked, till the other one took a hand! But I couldn't handle 'em both!"

"No," agreed Lafe, "you done damn good, as it was. I ain't kickin', Sid. I could tell from where I was layin' that you was fightin' hell out of 'em. 'By God,' I says to myself, 'Sid's got sand! He don't know how much sand he has got,' I says.

"The cache!" cried Logan suddenly. "Did they find the cache?"

"Let's go look," suggested Lafe.

Snatching the candle from the table, Logan dashed from the shack, closely followed by Lafe. Hurling himself into the bushes, the man threw himself flat on his belly, and thrust the candle into the hole.

"Gone!" he yelled. "Every damn sack of it gone! Forty-eight thousand dollars! Our whole summer's work gone with those damn thieves! Why in hell don't you say something?"

"Well," said Lafe, "there don't seem to be nothin' to say."

BACK in the shack, Lafe inspected the smashed bunks and the scattered tinware. "It'll take us most of tomorrow to git things straightened around agin," he observed. "We'll have to wait till next day to start the new shaft."

"Straightened around! New shaft! You don't mean to stand there and tell me you're going to let those robbers get away with it, do you?"

"They've already got away," said Lafe. "They went down the crick in a canoe. I seen 'em go. That's why I come back to the shack."

The utterance was greeted with a string of invective that paled even the gambler's first outburst. "And you'd sit down here and let those birds get away with all that dust?" he concluded.

"No. There wouldn't be nothin' in settin' around. What we better do is redd up the shack, an' start gittin' out more dust.

There's plenty more in the gravel. Hell—by spring, we kin have three, four times that much."

"Not by a damn sight! And what's more, I'm through on this creek! I'm through with you! To hell with a man that'll bust out at the first sign of trouble, and leave his partner to do all the fighting! I wouldn't winter out here for all the gold in the Yukon! I'm going after those birds, and I'm going to keep after 'em till I find 'em. And when I do catch up with 'em, by God, I'll get back every damn ounce they stole!"

"That's sand!" breathed Lafe admiringly. "Yes, sir—that's nothin' but pure sand!"

The following morning Lafe Lalonde stood by while Logan tossed his outfit into the canoe. "Would you like fer me to go 'long?" he asked hesitatingly, as the gambler was about to shove off.

Logan favored him with a glance of utter scorn. "You! Hell, no! What good would you be? There's going to be trouble at the end of this trail!"

Lafe nodded. "Yes, sir," he agreed. "That's jest what I figger. That is, in case you ketch up with 'em. They've got a hull night's start."

"I don't expect to overtake 'em," growled Logan. "They'll hit for Dawson, and that's where I'll get 'em. It may take a month, or six months, or a year before I locate 'em. But I'll never quit! I had damn good luck the last two nights, in Dawson. Ran my roll up to about forty thousand—won it in dust from some miners that overplayed their hands. I can afford to take my time. And, believe me, there's going to be hell a-popping when I catch up with those guys!"

"There sure will!" seconded Lafe heartily. "I'd like to be there! I always claimed you had plenty of sand."

When the man had been gone for an hour, Lafe scraped away fragments of loose rock from the talus a short distance up the valley, and removed two heavy packages done up in moosehide. One of these he placed in his blanket-roll, the other in his pack-sack, and stowing both in the poling boat, headed downstream for Dawson.

SID LOGAN grinned to himself as he paddled easily downstream. "He fell for that fake fight, hook, line, and sinker," he muttered. "The damn coward! I knew he would."

At Dawson Logan beached his canoe, and made straight for the Tivoli. Bursting through the doorway, he approached the bar where, as usual, several of the sourdoughs were grouped at the farther end.

"We've been robbed!" he exclaimed elbowing into the group. "Every damn ounce taken out of our cache!"

The sourdoughs exchanged glances. "I s'pose," ventured Camillo Bill, coldly, "that this here robbery took place whilst you an' Lafe was carousin' around, down here."

"No it didn't! It was after we got back. There were two of em, and they busted in through the door, and pulled guns on us. I tackled one of 'em, and Lafe made a dive for the door and got away. One of 'em must have located the cache while I was fighting the other, and pretty soon, he joined in and they tied me up and gagged me. Lafe came back after it was all over. He untied me, and we went and examined the cache. It was empty, all right. Every damn ounce gone—forty-eight thousand!"

"Where's Lafe at?" asked Bettles.

"Up at the claim. The damn coward!"

"H-u-m-m," drawled Camillo Bill. "An' what is it yer aimin' to do?"

"Why—go after those two damn robbers, of course! I'll bet they're right here in Dawson! It may take time—but I'll find 'em!"

"I 'spect you will," agreed Swiftwater Bill meaningly. "Yes, sir—I 'spect yer plumb anxious to meet up with them two hombres—pronto."

"What do you mean by that?" flashed Logan, flushing at the tone.

"Meanin'," replied Swiftwater, "that,

fer onct, we're takin' you at yer word."

"I'll be going,' announced Logan a bit awkwardly.

Quitting the room abruptly, he made straight for the Klondike Palace, quite unaware that Moosehide Charlie and Camillo Bill had fallen in not far behind. Back of the bar, Cuter Malone, with a swift jerk of the thumb, motioned toward the closed door of a little room that lay behind the back-bar.

Hardly had the man disappeared than the front door opened, and Moosehide and Camillo sauntered to the bar to be greeted vociferously by the proprietor. Sourdoughs rarely visited the notorious Klondike Palace, and Malone put himself out to be agreeable. The two ranged themselves at the end of the bar, nearly opposite the door that had just closed on Sid Logan.

IN THE little back room, lighted by a tin lamp in a wall bracket, Sid Logan faced two men who had risen abruptly from a table upon which were piled numerous little moosehide sacks. One was a tall, thin man. The shorter one stepped forward and turned the key in the lock of the door.

"Well," demanded the tall man, a nasty rasp in his voice, "what's the answer?"

"The answer?" queried Logan, his eyes shifting from the pile of little sacks to the face of the speaker. "What do you mean —the answer?"

The other's lips curled in a sneer. "Wheres' the forty-eight thousand in gold you claimed would be in them sacks?"

Logan's eyes snapped wide, and his lips thinned to a straight line. "What do you mean?" he snarled. "It's in the sacks—of course!"

"Yeah?" taunted the shorter man. "Well believe me, brother—it takes a damn sight bigger sacks than them to hold forty-eight thousan' dollars worth of *sand!*"

"Sand!" repeated Logan, staring as in a daze.

"Yes—sand!" echoed the tall man. "I don't know what yer game is, er how you expected to git away with it. When you put us onto this, you claimed yer pardner was a damn coward that wouldn't put up no fight; an' bein' at it was a cinch, ten percent apiece was good pay. That part was all right—an' so is these sacks bein' filled with sand all right—pervidin' you come acrost with nine thousan', six hundred berries—right on the nail!"

"But—but—" stammered Logan. "Good God, there's some mistake! I haven't got nine thousand—nor nine hundred, even. You boys know I was cleaned out the night before we pulled out for the creek!"

"You dirty double-crossin' crook!" cried the short man. "I see yer game! You switched the dust fer sand, an' then hired us to lift the cache. Yer pardner thinks the dust was stole! You git it all—an' you leave us holdin' the bag!"

Logan suddenly saw red. His dazed senses came back with a rush. These two dirty crooks standing there and accusing him of double-crossing them! Instantly he saw through their whole rotten scheme. They, themselves, had switched the dust for sand on their way downriver! They had the dust! And they had him cold! He wouldn't dare squawk—wouldn't dare let

anyone know he knew who the robbers were! Like a flash his hand shot beneath his vest and came out clutching a gun.

"Come clean!" He fairly screamed the words. "Come clean, you damn cheap double-crossers! Fork over that dust, or I'll blow you to hell!"

The short man made a move with his hand. A shot rang out and he sprawled

across the table, choking, and coughing red froth. Another gun barked. Logan staggered back, half whirled, and stumbled toward the taller man, his gun spitting flame.

When Cuter Malone and the two sourdoughs burst into the room, two men lay on the floor, and one was sprawled grotesquely across the table.

"Ten percent," babbled the man on the table, red blood welling from his lips with the words. "Ten percent, apiece—he double-crossed us—it was nothin'—but sand . . ." The words ended in a horrible choking gurgle, and the man slumped to the floor.

Roused by the impact of the body against his own, Logan opened rapidly glazing eyes. "Sand," he repeated, in a choking voice. "Let me think—he was always talking—about—sand—we've—all been—double-crossed . . ." That voice, too, trailed off into an inaudible murmur —and silence.

"My Gawd—they're all dead!" cried the proprietor of the Klondike Palace, rising from a hurried inspection.

"Ain't that the truth?" agreed Moosehide Charlie. "She's sure a fine evenin'!"

IN THE Tivoli, after the departure of Camillo Bill and Moosehide Charlie in the wake of the gambler, Swiftwater Bill turned to old Bettles. "I know'd that damn cuss would git the best of Lafe somehow," he said. "That there's a fake robbery—an' he's at the bottom of it."

"Sure he is," agreed Bettles. "Serves Lafe right. He'd orted to listened to us. That'll learn him to lay off'n chechakos. He's got plenty left in the gravel."

"Yeah," admitted Swiftwater, "onlest ——"

"Onlest—what?"

"Well, onlest this here tin-horn lied. How do we know Lafe's safe back there on the claim? How do we know they didn't knock him off?"

"By God, you spoke a piece!" cried old Bettles. "Me an' you's got to git busy! Moosehide an' Camillo'll keep cases on the tin-horn. We'll hit out fer Lafe's claim! Skip over to yer shack an' grab up an armful of blankets! I'll 'tend to the grub!"

Swiftwater Bill was halfway to the door, when old Bettles turned to the bartender. "Hey, Curley—throw half a dozen quarts of licker, an' a piece of cheese in a sack, an' toss her here! Me an' Swiftwater's hittin' the trail!"

Half an hour later, they were back in the Tivoli, accompanied by Lafe Lalonde, whom they had sighted coming downriver in a poling boat, as they were about to launch their canoe. Depositing two heavy packs on the floor at the end of the bar, Lafe joined the two sourdoughs who were busy pouring their drinks.

"It's too damn bad you lose yer dust, Lafe," commiserated Swiftwater. "But you'd ort to listened to us. Any damn fool could of saw that there hombre was crooked!"

"Where's he at?" asked Lafe, filling his glass.

"Who?" asked Moosehide Charlie, as he approached the bar, accompanied by Camillo Bill.

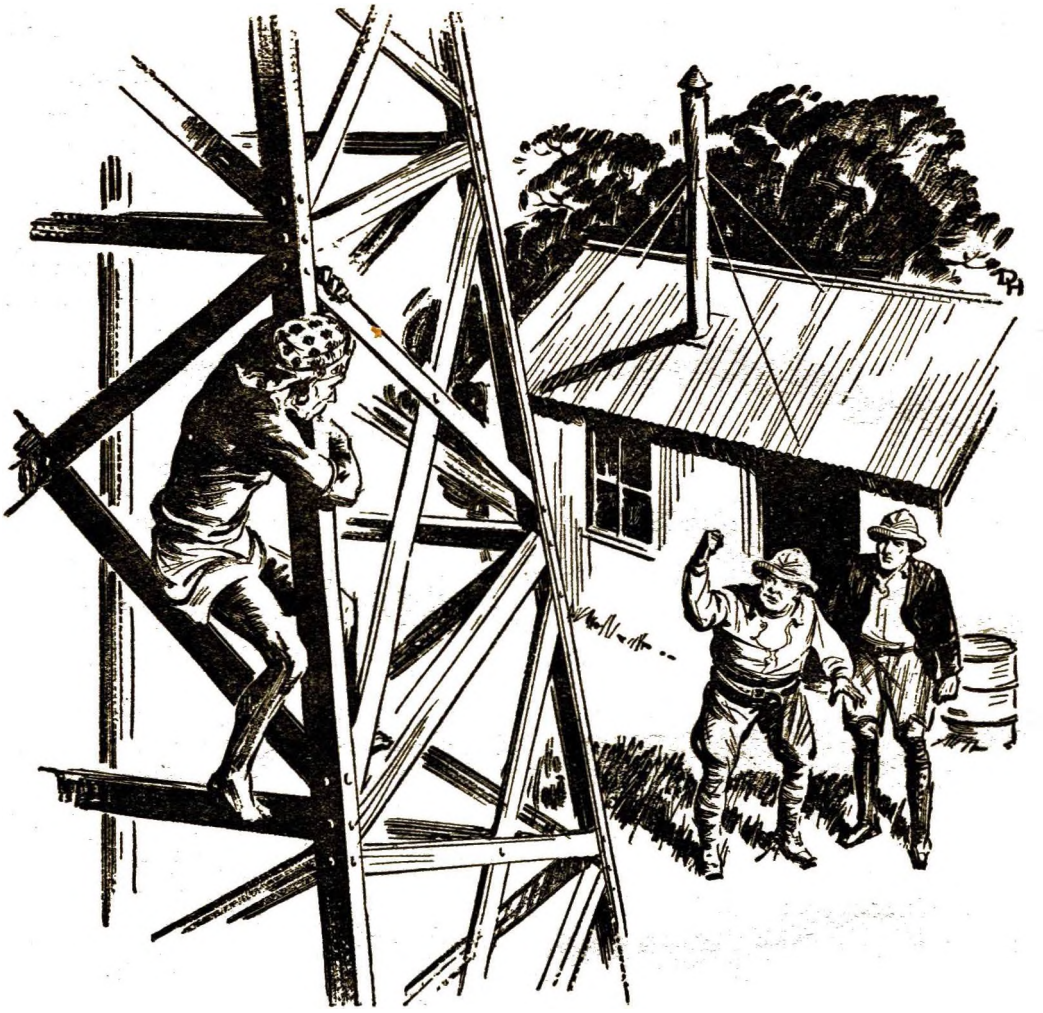
"Why—Sid Logan—my pardner. He took out after them robbers."

"Found 'em, too," announced Camillo grimly. "They're all three dead as hell. Shot it out in Cuter Malone's back room."

"Well—I'll be damned!" exclaimed Lafe Lalonde, setting his glass down. Deliberately, he turned to his two heavy packs and lifted them onto the bar. "Weigh 'em in, Curley—an' give me a receipt. They'll go right around forty-eight thousan'."

"But——"

"Pore Sid," Lafe went on, ignoring old Bettles. "There must of be'n some misunderstandin'. Fill 'em up, boys. We'll drink this un to Sid. I always told you he had sand—more sand than was good fer him."



TOP BOY

By FRANK KNOX HOCKMAN

Author of "Black Tony's Knife," etc.

The West meets the East oil-drilling in Burma.

"Consider then the dha yal, my son. To the spent runner who complaineth of the meagre rice in his belly and the ache in his fluttering legs she is only a song bird. But the wise know that the dha yal sings of promise and points the way to him who listeneth and thinketh deep."——Proverb of the Burmese.

LYAKH of the scarred face stood in the blazing Burma sun, beside the tool feed screw of the drilling oil well. His sinewy arms were folded across his brown chest, and his sloe eyes were half closed as they dreamily watched a tiny *dha yal* fluttering about the nectar pots of a coral tree. Lyakh's slim, supple body and his

whole superstitious soul were concentrated in an effort to interpret the song of the little bird. For Lyakh needed the guidance of the friendly wisdom that proverbs say abides in the sweet-voiced, feathered mite. Lyakh's full lips moved in a soundless incantation, propitiatory to the spirits, both the evil and the good. Somewhere, somehow, there *must* be a way for him to prevent Sera—Sera of the buffalo body and the ready kriss—from selling the beautiful Azzali to the white man who desired her.

"Nene mwawa! Dammit! *Nene mwawa!"*

From the awninged alcove, in one corner of the standard drilling rig, the querulous roar of Ben Cabal's voice shattered Lyakh's meditations. Ben was the present master of Lyakh's fate—an American driller brought to Burma by the Royal Products Company, to train native labor in the art of "tool pushin'." At the command of that voice Lyakh went into a flurry of motion, for in Americo-Burmese *nene mwawa* meant action. The degree of speed necessary depended upon the tone of voice in which the order was given. If the voice was drawling and languid, it meant simply, "A little bit more." If the voice carried a rasp, as Ben's did now, it meant, "Feed 'er some more screw, y' damn dried-up ape!" As a language Burmese is expressive like that. Lyakh wasted no time. Meticulously following the exact ritual for *nene mwawaing* in a hurry, he loosened the set screw that held the feed arm of the drilling tools, took exactly two full turns on the arm, which lowered the tools exactly two inches, re-tightened the set screw, and once more folded his arms. It was done. Back in the shaded alcove, Ben Cabal and Andy Tabor exchanged glances of disgust.

"There y' are!" Ben growled. "Two turns he takes. Never no more, an' never no less. Don't even have brains enough t' feel the tools, t' see if they're hittin' on bottom 'r just hangin' loose in the hole. Been with me two months, an' I ain't been able t' learn him nothin'. That's some more of the efficiency the big hats show down here. Want me t' teach one of these furless apes how t' drill, when I can't talk his monkey jargon an' he ain't got brains enough t' learn mine. Bah! If it wasn't so dang hot I'd take the whole half dozen of 'em that's hangin' 'round the well, an' drown 'em in the sand pumpin's. Helpers they call 'em. Helpers? Huh! An' now they're comin' up here from Rangoon headquarters t' give us an inspection. As if this blasted Dutchman, Thalmann, that we got f'r a field super, ain't pain in the neck enough. Just 'cause he done some drillin' f'r th' Dutch Shell, over in Borneo, the Limeys think he's a expert. Lemme catch one of them big hats doin' any criticizin' 'round this well. I'll tell him what I think of him an' Thalmann an' his blasted native helpers."

"Take it easy, Ben! Take it easy," Andy interrupted soothingly. "You're gettin' all purple 'round the gills. 'Member what the croaker told us 'fore we left Oklahoma 'bout gettin' excited in this climate. Now listen! We know our business, don't we? An' we're drillin' plenty of hole each tower, ain't we? Damn right answers both them questions. T 'ell with the inspectors, where we're concerned! Now I've just been tipped that the reason the big hats 're comin' here is 'count of them not bein' satisfied with Thalmann. You can bet y'r return home guarantee that if anything happens t' displease them inspectin' bozos, t'morrow, Thalmann'll get the gate, an' one of us guys'll be made super. We'll talk more 'bout it t'night, w'en we're layin' down there in the river water. Ain't so apt t' get appleplaxy. Meantime, don't get t' thinkin' 'bout it. Too hot."

BEN CABAL hadn't been in Burma long enough to turn brown, and he still sweated profusely. He was just at that tender stage when, had he been a roast of beef, a housewife might have closed the oven on him, and turned out the fire. Consequently Ben's anger wasn't as im-

pressive as it ought to have been. And he knew it. And that irked him. And so he was disgusted with himself as he was disgusted with everything else in Bwalapan. Right now, Ben was a horrible example of the rolling stone. He was worse than mossless, for most of his skin had peeled, and his morale was at that touchy stage that might abruptly develop into anything from simple hysteria to a wild *amok*.

Andy walked off, through the blazing sun, toward the well where he, too, was inflicted with native helpers. Ben's gaze followed the pajama-and-pith-helmet clad figure of his friend, and a look almost of awe spread over his blistered face, as Andy's lean figure danced and quivered in the shimmering heat rays like the spectre in a mirage.

"That dang Andy must be a salamander with a asbestos hide," Ben muttered. "The son-of-a-gun acts like he enjoyed this here climate. Hey, boy! *Nene mwawa,* dammit!"

Ben leaned back in his niche, and raised one hand languidly to pull the trip cord that caused water from the barrel lashed overhead to sprinkle down over his powerful, pajama-clad body. The water was warm enough for a winter night bath, back home in Pennsylvania, but to Ben's parboiled, prickly-heated discomfort it brought a momentary soothing that was almost bliss. Ben's nerves were drawn so taut by the never-ending heat that his lean face wore a hard, strained look. Burma—natives—Thalmann—big hats—Gr-r-r-r-r-r!

OF COURSE, had Ben been the only white driller in Burma, he might have taken drastic steps for the immediate amelioration of his hateful situation. At worst, he could have done just what he had a yen to do—gone back to that part of the world where snakes are measured by the foot instead of by the rod, and where steam baths are a luxury rather than an ever-present necessity and a blasted nuisance. Ben was just one of thirty American drillers who had signed up with the Royal Products for a year, and being Ben, he wouldn't quit until exactly twenty-nine other drillers admitted themselves to be licked. And since the other twenty-nine were just as bull-headed as Ben, the *status quo* threatened to continue indefinitely. At that, it wouldn't be so bad if it wasn't for the biggety, officious Thalmann—dang his squat, round-faced meanness! For two cents—Ben's breath sucked through his teeth, and he stiffened.

Disregarding the heat that made his temples throb and beat, Ben Cabal rose to the full height of his tall, powerful body and stepped out onto the blazing drilling floor. From his mop of black hair sweat ran down his forehead, trickled right and left from the irregular bridge of his broken nose, and tortured the already red-rimmed tenderness of his sunken wide gray eyes. His mouth was set in a determined line, and his lean jaw was stubborn. Thalmann was coming toward his rig. And not by any means would Cabal allow Thalmann to realize the full measure of his misery. Ben stood beside the screw, one hand resting on the steel feed arm in deliberate endurance of its blistering-hot surface. He paid no attention whatever to Thalmann. But he caught the fact at once that the Dutchman was in an extraordinarily friendly mood.

"Leaff the natiff hantle the tools for a while, Kapal," Thalmann advised, "ant ve talk. I haff some things to say."

WITHOUT replying, Ben led the way into his awninged alcove, and deliberately seated himself on the only chair the place afforded. Apparently unmindful of the slight, Thalmann squatted his blocky body on his heels and smiled ingratiatingly.

But his china-blue eyes were coldly watchful.

"Tomorrow," he announced, "ve haff an inspection, ant I am fery anxious to make a goot showing. Use special care vhile the officials are here. It is imbortant that nothing shouldt happen to mar their goot opinion of our methods. You un'erstand?"

"Important to who?" Ben asked bluntly. "To me, or you?"

"To all off us." Thalmann's eyes flashed with sudden ire. "By making the officials happy with me, you in turn profit by my friendship."

"Don't want it." Ben couldn't resist making that retort. "You just go ahead an' stagger 'round here, an' do what y' have t' do, but don't bother me with y'r damnfool ideas of drillin'. Most Dutchmen know their business, but you're just a big bluff, an' y' don't know half as much 'bout drillin' methods as the Limeys think y' do. Y'r foolin' them, but y' ain't foolin' us guys."

"Budt vich vouldt you rather haff?" Thalmann asked, leaning forward earnestly. "Vouldt you brefer a man who bermits you to do as you blease, or an Englishman who vouldt insist that you do vot he orters?"

"Oh ho!" Ben grinned widely. "So it really is you they're after, is it? Good! I hope they get you. Me, I won't do a thing for y', 'r ag'in y'. This rig'll run just as usual. That's all."

DURING the talk of the white men Lyakh had scarcely moved a muscle. But his eyes, glowing like polished bronze, kept darting from the little bird in the coral tree to the point where Sera, father of the lovely Azzali, squatted on the derrick floor. Excitement, intense interest, cunning shone in Lyakh's eyes, but no one paid any attention, and none noted the savage grin of hatred that twisted his scarred lips as Thalmann strode from the well.

Lyakh's life had been just one thing after six or seven others. Having begun his career as a worker in the Calcutta jute mills, he had later managed to get a farm in Bengal. A Pathan money lender tricked him out of that. Then he worked for a long time in a coal mine at Anasol, for sixteen cents a day. When he got a chance to be "top boy" on a well drilling for oil in the Yenang-yaung field, up the Irrawaddy, he took it with many thankful feelings, and with a whole volley of appreciative clucks and mystic words for those friendly spirits that had sought him out for this great honor.

As director—under Ben—of the little-understood power that *balumped, balumped, balumped* a hole down into the ground in search of the greasy fluid that the English and American sahibs so mysteriously set great store by, and as top boy over two assistants, each of whom, in turn, had two assistant assistants, Lyakh was determined to be a man among men. He would acquire a woman of his own, become a householder, and take his proper social position in the native quarters. Being a man of parts, however, and a traveller, Lyakh was not satisfied with the ordinary run-of-mine eligible women. He needs must cast about for a woman who would outshine her sisters. And thus casting about he had come upon Azzali, the daughter of Sera, who was assistant to Lyakh's second assistant.

Nor was Lyakh's suit displeasing in the eyes of the fair Azzali. The girl's full red lips smiled widely over pearl-like teeth at the honor bestowed upon her by the courtship of the scarred and fierce-eyed Lyakh. Her slender, young brown body posed and postured for his favor, as was the custom of her people, and her big dark, soulful eyes were so expressive of her admiration that Lyakh's original approach of fortuitous expediency blazed into passionate love and desire. And so, strong in his position of top boy stooping to intercourse with a mere assistant to an assistant, Lyakh broached the subject of his desire to the father of Azzali—and got the surprise of his life.

HERETOFORE, in his contact with his fellows Lyakh had had considerable success. For Lyakh had all the earmarks of a man who would forcefully resent any opposition. His bronze body was plentifully marked with little white scars that might have been battle wounds, but were in reality mementos of boom-shoots in the Anasol coal mines. Other scars, older and uglier, remained from the jute mill sores which, during his years of adolescence, had been as much a part of him as his scanty loin cloth. Those scars, and his erect, strong carriage, gave him an air, a presence, that seldom met determined opposition. But in Sera he found an exception.

"No!" For two whole weeks Sera had deigned no other answer to Lyakh's suit for the hand of Azzali. Then, as the suitor grew more and more insistently solicitous, Sera flew into a rage. Springing to his feet from where he squatted on the sand before his grass hut, he snatched his short kriss from a peg, and brandished the wicked weapon in Lyakh's face.

"No!" he roared. "Bother me no more. Or must I slice thee a head shorter! Go! You cannot have the girl. She goes to the white sahib."

Lyakh smiled deceptively. "The white sahib?" he repeated.

"Even so. I have the promise of Thalmann Sahib that if I sell the girl to him, he will befriend me. In addition to the price that we have already agreed upon, he will also make me, Sera, top boy on one of the wells. It is agreed. Enough!"

What could Lyakh say? To save his face he looked wise and nodded, but he turned and went away without a word.

SERA'S revelation put Lyakh in a delicate position. None knew better than he the danger of opposing the wishes of Thalmann. And Thalmann, if his personal enmity were not sufficient, would only have to brand Lyakh as a trouble-making native with the English sahibs, and Lyakh's life would be of little worth. There was one other angle to be considered—Ben Cabal. But even there Lyakh was at a disadvantage. For, profiting by the experiences of his past, Lyakh had followed a precept of his people: That man who would know all and be unknown, should remember the cheetah, which gives voice only in the moment of victory. Lyakh had not let it be known that he understood English, but he had listened. Now he was possessed of the knowledge that Beni Sahib also disliked Thalmann Sahib, and wished his downfall. But Lyakh could not go to Ben for advice, lest Ben resent his servant's secretiveness about his understanding of the English tongue. Therefore, Lyakh listened intently to the song of the *dha yal* in the coral tree, and searched for a solution of his difficulties. There must be something he could do that would break the contract between Sera and Thalmann in such a way that it would find favor in Ben's eyes. Lyakh considered deeply.

Heretofore, the only thing he had heard Ben find fault with, aside from the heat, was himself—Lyakh. But now, Thalmann also. Lyakh cocked one ear to listen to the *dha yal.* No inspiration. Even the song had stopped. He raised his eyes to search for the winged messenger of good fortune, and his heart sank. A shaggy gray squirrel had invaded the coral tree and was contesting ownership of the nectar pots with the bird. The battle between the two was unfair. Up the main stock of the tree and out along a heavy limb the squirrel scampered, paying no attention whatever to the excited bird that darted about him in angry objection to his presence. Closer and closer to the nectar pots the squirrel approached. And now Lyakh started, and a fierce, victorious smile blazed on his face. For the squirrel had suddenly stopped, then backed away, and with every demonstration of angry disgust, jumped chattering from the tree. And as the invader left, the little songster dropped lightly to a fragile twig, where he stood on tip toe, and with head raised, sang his exultation.

And now Lyakh had received his inspiration, his guidance from the friendly spirits. Life now presented a different aspect, to Lyakh. He realized that there were limitations to what he had learned, but it was sufficient. He could do nothing toward gaining Ben's confidence, and attaining his own ends, where Ben's antipathies fastened on the weather, and on himself. Anyhow, Lyakh approved of the weather, and of himself. Which left all possibilities lying in Thalmann and the English sahibs who were coming. Now *there* was a different sort of water buffalo. In Calcutta, Lyakh had learned considerable about the eccentricities of English. Even a Bengali would be more than stupid if he failed to realize that there were just lots of things around a drilling well—provided those things were properly presented—that English sahibs would not approve of. And now Lyakh had heard with his own ears that Ben desired the English sahibs to find fault with Thalmann. He had said, "I hope they get you," in a voice. *Gai!*

AS SOON as his day's work on the well was finished, Lyakh hastened to the native quarters. In the seclusion of his wifeless hut he performed many incantations to ward off the evil spirits of the dead that might be about the land before he could return after nightfall. Nor did he forget the very needful promises of future service to his thousand-and-one gods and devils of good intention. After which he sallied forth.

His first stop was at the elephant kraal, where he held long converse with old Pthota, the black-skinned chief mahout of the herd that did all the moving and hauling about the lease. Here, by good fortune, Lyakh's mention of Thalmann as the object against which he desired to move was sufficient to gain him a friendly hearing. When he left the kraal, after a quarter hour—leaving behind him a lot of promises of future favors—he grinned to himself, knowing that when he returned, after dark, he would find ready for him the things that the English sahibs would surely dislike on the following day. From the kraal Lyakh made his furtive way to the dak bungalow occupied by Ben. Here he held a whispered talk with Ben's *punkah* boy, then slipped away to where an itinerant fakir had quartered himself with his snakes and his pipes. Late at night, in fear and trembling of the spirits of the dead that he could hear rustling the sand and making ominous the deep song throb of the distant jungle, Lyakh returned to the elephant kraal. Quickly, he possessed himself of the heavy-weighted bag he found awaiting him, and hastened toward the silent drilling rig, his gait materially goaded by a desire to rid himself of his unpleasant burden.

As a result of Lyakh's visit to the *punkah* boy and the travelling fakir, Ben Cabal spent a bad night. His nerves were already frayed to the quivering point by the heat. And the *punkah* swung with an eternal rasping squeak. He didn't dare grease the blasted thing, either, or fifty million insects would come to eat the grease and get downright impudent. Suddenly a commotion took place in the room. Without warning, the rotted canvas that comprised the ceiling bulged downward under a great weight, ripped open, and, to the accompaniment of suggestive squeaks and rustlings from the thatch roof, a twelve-foot python came hurtling to the floor. Only part of it lit on Ben. But unfortunately, the rest of it smashed the flimsy *punkah* beyond immediate repair. That meant a night of unalleviated, breathless, smothering heat. But to the heat, trimmings were added. A flock of invading monkeys took a fancy to Ben's insect net, and appropriated it. Since Ben had chased the *punkah* boy away when the *punkah* went dead, he had to cope personally with the monkeys. Before the contest was ended—Ben came out second best

—he was heartily ready to subscribe to the "East is east and West is west" theory.

The rest of the night was insect-full. The wattle roof of the *dak* had undoubtedly been the family headquarters for the insect tribes inhabiting the entire district north from Rangoon, and via the hole in the canvas ceiling cloth that the python had made, they all descended to get neighborly with Cabal. In weary disgust he finally gave up trying to sleep, and ventured down to the river bank in the dark.

Twenty feet from the *dak,* he stumbled over a mountain that didn't belong there, and almost got stepped on as Mrs. Crummie, the lease's pensioned elephant rose startled and went lumbering away, squealing her protests for the world to hear. Arrived at the river, Ben heard, somewhere out in the watery darkness, sounds that made him think of a giant nut cracker working on a barrel of English walnuts. He knew it for a sleepy crocodile finishing a yawn. And it was shivery.

Dawn found Ben a bundle of jumpy nerves, just sane enough to realize that he was in no condition to be diplomatic with the big hats from Rangoon. A mess! But as the time for the inspection drew near, Ben was not the only one at the drilling well who felt uneasy.

At the tools, Lyakh held his usual pose, calmly contemplative; but his eyes repeatedly travelled to the long bailer that hung against one side of the derrick, the trip valve on the bottom of its hollow length held some two feet above the floor by the sand line, reeved to the bail on its top, by means of which, after each five-foot screw was run, the bailer was lowered into the hole, to bail out the sand and muck of the drilling. Lyakh was sorely troubled. In vain he kept an ear attuned to the coral tree, waiting for the song that would announce the presence of the friendly *dha yal.* But except for the marauding squirrel, the coral tree was empty of life. A very bad spirit sign! Lyakh's teeth were clenched, and his lips kept moving in frantic prayers. The *dha yal must* come and sponsor what should happen. After all his preparations, things *must* turn out right. Lyakh praised all the bovine gods and many-armed goddesses with which he was on speaking terms for the successful way in which they had permitted his plans for the night to work. The *punkah* boy and the fakir had done their parts well. Beni Sahib was too sleepy this morning to notice how slow the work was going. Praise Siva! Else would the screw have long since been run out, and the bailer dropped into the hole. And Lyakh didn't want to run that bailer—not yet.

THEN, just as Ben called out his thirtieth sleepy *nene mwawa* of the morning, and as Lyakh obediently lowered the tools the last two inches which would make the running of the bailer imperative, a number of figures clad in immaculate white duck came striding toward the well. At the moment of their appearance Lyakh's heart gave a bound of joy. For the song of the *dha yal* burst on the air, and the feathered herald of good promise fluttered about the nectar cups on the coral tree, while the invading squirrel slunk away in defeat.

Lyakh took time for a few muttered prayers, then turned to Ben with an expressively questioning upward gesture of his hands. At Ben's nod, Lyakh immediately broke into a volley of Hindustani, and the rig became a scene of wild activity. Lyakh's assistants, and their assistants, sprang forward. The great walking beam was stopped. The feed screw was loosened from the drilling cable and swung aside. The giant bull-wheels began their steady grind, to drag the ton of steel drilling stem and bitt from the hole, preparatory to bailing the drillings and starting a new five-foot cut. When the seven inspectors entered the rig, the tools were half way out of the hole.

"Ah! Ve are joost in time to see vun off the natiff crews demonstrate its efficiency," Thalmann announced, as he led the way into the derrick. "You will now

see, Sir Rubert, how my training methods optain goot results."

"Make haste, Thalmann, with your demonstration." The speaker was a tall, lank man—a Briton from the top of his over-sized pith helmet to the tips of his long narrow shoes. "Make haste," he repeated, as he strode toward Ben, who stood just inside the shadow cast by his awning. "And this, I suppose, is one of the American drillers." His eyes travelled up and down Ben's powerful frame in the manner of a Yorkshire farmer inspecting an Alderney bull. "A beefy, surly-looking chap! You keep a filthy work place, my man," he announced sharply, indicating the grease-and-muck-smeared interior of the rig with a contemptuous jerk of his thumb. "That you are under contract for a year's labor is no reason for becoming swinish. Filth," he said sententiously, "is reprehensible in a white man. I detest dirt of any sort. You'll go native, my man, unless you pick up."

"Yeah?" Ben's face had gone darker and darker as the Englishman's talk proceeded. By an effort of will he had managed to evade its sharpest thrust, centering his mind on the work of Lyakh and his helpers, as they swung the tools from the hole and hooked them back out of the bailer's way. He watched them drop the bailer into the hole, saw Lyakh standing at the controls, his eyes, blazing with excitement, fastened on the coral tree. But when the Englishman made his final blunt statement, Ben snapped out of his determined

inattention. "Yeah?" he repeated. "Go native, eh? Well, let me tell you somethin', Mister Wise Cracker. I ain't got no native girls hangin' 'round my quarters, like some down here has. An' anyhow, I ain't personally none of y'r damn business. Go ahead an' make y'r inspection, but keep off'n me. I ain't got no use f'r——" Ben stopped, went tense. He sensed that something was radically wrong with Lyakh.

AT THE throttle and control arm of the bailer, Lyakh was in an ecstasy of anticipation. He, the travelled Lyakh, was about to demonstrate to his less perspicacious fellows the reason why he was top boy of the Beni Sahib—the servant par excellence, the retainer to be trusted. And not only that. Lyakh was also about to poison two jackals with a single chunk of meat—one jackal for Beni Sahib and one for himself. The *dha yal* was indeed a bird to show the way.

As the long bailer came dripping from the mouth of the casing, and swung clear, Lyakh raised his hand imperiously in signal to Sera to come forward and guide the full tube into the sump hole, for emptying. Unquestioningly, Sera sprang to comply with the order—an unprecedented honor from Lyakh. Placing his powerful hands against the wet side of the twenty-foot tube that now swayed slowly back and forth, clear of the hole, he pushed the bottom end of it toward the small opening in the floor that gave access to the sand pumping sump. Lowered through the opening, the plunger valve on the bailer's bottom end would strike on the solid bottom, and the cargo of drillings would be released with a rush. As the father of Azzali—stubborn, adamant father—moved toward the opening with the end of the muck-smeared tube, Lyakh's face was wreathed in a smile.

"The blame fawning ape!" Ben snarled to himself. "Tryin' t' show off in front of the big hats. I'll teach him who's boss 'round here, when they leave. Blast him! I'll——" Then another thought struck home, and the light in Ben's eyes changed subtly, came alive with quick interest. He

had watched Lyakh try to show off before. If only——

Suddenly Ben jerked forward. Lyakh had turned his head to one side, had shot one swift glance toward the awninged corner. The native's face held a look that startled and disturbed Ben, a look of understanding, of cupidity, of cunning.

NOT waiting to analyze that look, Ben took a single step forward. But before he could interfere, before he could even call out a warning against the threat of some unknown danger that impended, it was already too late.

Sera was within a foot of the sump hole when Lyakh's scarred brown cheeks puffed out in pursed determination, and his right hand flashed backward in sudden release of the friction clutch by means of which the bailer was held suspended in the air. The bailer sank abruptly through Sera's hands, and its plunger valve struck on the floor of the derrick. Simultaneously there came a rising crescendo of shouts and yells from the inspecting party, and a wail of despair from Sera. With the gush and spray of its twenty feet of pressure the bailer had vomited its cargo over the immaculately clad inspection party.

Ben sprang clear of his shaded niche just in time to receive a generous portion of the lashing spray full in the face. Staggering back to sanctuary, he began digging at his eyes. The contents of that bailer was the stinkingest stuff that he had ever seen come out of a well. It was awful. Gagging and spluttering, he managed to get the nasty mess wiped away, then he raised his eyes to survey his surroundings.

THE first thing Ben'r gaze rested on was the figure of Lyakh. The native was standing near, just outside of the awninged space. His lean arms were folded across his muscular chest. His head was thrown back in a victor's pose. His eyes were bright pools of grinning deviltry that moved back and forth from Sera, crouched miserably on the floor, to the departing crew of inspectors. As Ben's eyes caught sight of the inspectors he sprang from his corner and, disregarding the heat, crossed the floor to a point of better vantage.

Drenched from head to foot with the noisome mess that had gouted from the bailer, Sir Rupert of the inspection party, was bounding along over the ground in close pursuit of a blocky figure that was recognizable as Thalmann. The rest of the party, straggling along in a dirty and dishevelled line, trotted wretchedly in the wake of their leader. As Ben watched, one of the tall leader's legs lashed out in a kick that was reminiscent of former soccer training, and his narrow shoe thudded against Thalmann's most vulnerable exposure. Twice more the kick was repeated. Then Thalmann, in his haste, stumbled and fell, and the enraged Englishman stood over him, making gestures, the meaning of which were graphically unmistakable—Thalmann was done.

A chuckle rose in Ben's throat, and he turned back toward his retreat. But as he swung around, the grin on his face was wiped away by an expression of utter surprise. With a quick bow, Lyakh had broken into speech—English.

"English sahibs always desirings native boy for makings of goat, Beni Sahib," Lyakh announced softly. "One is here for theese position." He pointed to the crouching Sera, who still rocked himself back and forth in the smeary mess that covered the floor. "Theese mans not makings good 'balump, balump' boy. I thinkings maybe Beni Sahib telling him he mus' go 'way queek, and go alone, 'fore English sahibs takings bath and huntings heem for keel. Alone he mus' go, Sahib. Certainly, alone. Yes-s-s-s-s-s-s-s?"

FOR a long moment, Ben stood staring down into the eyes of the metamorphosed Lyakh. Slowly he stooped forward and examined the smear that remained of the bailer's contents. A look of bewilder-

ment mixed with disgust spread over his face as he identified the noxious mess. He raised his eyes and let them bore into Lyakh's. The native's shoulders rose in an expressive gesture, and his eyes were slowly curtained by the grinning folds of flesh that rose over his cheek bones.

"Rotted *bhuty* for elephant physic, Sahib," Lyakh whispered. "I heard the Sahib desire the departings of Thalmann Sahib, and I am good helper to the Sahib. I leesten to the *dha yal,* Sahib, and he telling me how he drive squirrel away from coral tree—much bad smell. So then, I do. English sahibs will returning from bathings for making of questionings. This miserable man, Sahib. Must he not make departings away, hastily—and alone?"

It took Lyakh a surprisingly short time, after the departure of Sera—alone—for points unknown, to get the derrick cleaned up. And when he came back to the well with his freshly-bathed and irate colleagues, it took surprisingly little explaining to convince Sir Rupert that the shower he had experienced was wholly attributable to the carelessness of the departed Sera.

"But the stench!" Sir Rupert exclaimed. "Pah! I give you my word, my man, I never encountered such a stench in all my life."

"Sorry," Ben replied, with a grin. "But *I* don't choose the stuff the bailer brings up."

"Of course not! But Thalmann should have warned us against such an exigency, should he not?" At Ben's delighted nod of approval, Sir Rupert continued. "Just so. Thalmann is discharged. I shall place one of the Americans, the man named—ah—Tabor, in charge, for the time. He seems acclimated. We must have someone who is accustomed to such things."

Next day, with the inspection a thing of the past, and having enjoyed a good night's sleep, Ben lolled drowsily in the drip of his shower. Out at the screw, Lyakh stood in his accustomed pose.

Ben stretched luxuriously. "Hey, Lyakh! *Nene mwawa,*" he called.

Lyakh's arms unfolded languidly, and he loosened the feed arm set screw. He allowed the arm to spin around of its own accord until it would go no farther. A full foot he allowed the tools to drop, then he closed the screw with a lazy flip of his hand. Lyakh's belly was full of a spicy curry prepared by Azzali. Up in the coral tree the *dha yal* sang sweetly. The world was a good place—a place of peace. There was no need for haste. He understood that *nene mwawa* now meant, "Mebby she needs a little more there, Big Boy."

As a language Burmese is expressive, like that.

COINED GOLD IS ONLY MONEY. RAW GOLD HAS IN IT THE HEARTS, THE GUTS AND THE SOULS OF MEN

RAW GOLD

***by* James B. Hendryx**

Begins in our next issue

Adventurers All

TIGER BAIT

SHOOTING a tiger from a howdah atop an elephant is great sport, provided you or at least your mahout or native driver knows the elephant's personal history before he takes him into the jungle. I had come to India from Australia. My pet ambition was to shoot a tiger. The elephant that was palmed off on my mahout bore the dignified name of Lady. Had either of us known that Lady had never seen a tiger, thus lacking the most important subject in a tiger-hunting pachyderm's training curriculum, we wouldn't have gone into the jungle with her.

We fared forth, my mahout and I, into a part of the forest reputed to be thickly infested with tigers. When we had penetrated a mile there was a sudden hefty movement in the thicket alongside of us and the flash of a tiger's stripes. Immediately Lady lifted her trunk and bolted with us in a frenzy of trumpeting. There was about fifty yards of this mad careering on her part through the undergrowth and then the limb of a tree struck the howdah, tipping it over and spilling me in a small clearing in such a way that when I hit the ground, my knee was painfully wrenched. With a thunder-like sound the panic-stricken old Lady continued her mad flight through the jungle, my mahout clinging to her and shouting frantic, endearing phrases in a futile effort to calm her.

The paining of my knee rendered me incapable of rising to my feet until, hearing a movement in the undergrowth close behind me, I looked and beheld a magnificent tiger watching me. My rifle was nowhere in sight. The tiger caused me to forget my injury and spurred me to my feet, whereupon Stripes growled menacingly, it indicating his dislike for me all too plainly. I began backing away. This displeased him still more. With a single leap he sprang upon me and threw me to the ground with a force that stunned me.

As I regained my senses the first thing I became aware of was that I was lying on my back and looking up at the white belly of a huge tiger! The great brute was standing squarely over me, snarling and lashing its tail. I did not dare to move. Facing death as I was, it seemed that in the next few moments all the important events of my past life sought to crowd themselves into my memory.

Suddenly the tiger trod back. Then, clamping his jaws over my arm near the shoulder, he ran with me to the edge of the thicket, where he dropped me. His jaws caused me no pain whatever, but the rough dragging over the ground felt anything but comfortable. Whirling around, the tiger stood over me again, growling ominously and lashing his tail. I turned my head slightly, to behold a second tiger facing the one standing over me. It was this beast that he was growling at. Though quite dazed with fear, it trickled into my tortured mind that this second tiger was set on taking me away from the first one.

Snarling and growling, the second tiger made a rush forward. The one standing over me sprang, too, and the next instant their great paws clashed in the air above me. Then falling back they lay in a half crouching position, snarling and blowing their fetid breath into my face. I was lying squarely between them. A few seconds passed, though it seemed an hour to me, and then the tiger on my left made

a move to seize me and drag me away from the other. Instantly, with an angry roar, the one crouching over me leaped and the next moment the two great brutes were fighting over my prostrate body, filling my eyes with dust. When their fangs missed, their jaws snapped together like the report of a rifle.

All at once the one that had crouched at my left, evidently the weaker, wavered, and with the other upon him, the fight was carried into the middle of the clearing. Here in a cloud of dust the two big cats, roaring savagely, sparred and, rearing on their hind feet, struck each other blows which echoed in the forest silence. During their relaxed vigilance I crawled to the undergrowth. But just as I was halfway into concealment, the weaker beast leaped away as if to seek shelter in the recesses, whereupon the first tiger hastily returned and, seizing my leg, he pulled me none too gently back in the clearing.

Then he lay down with his big paws across my middle. Turning my head I saw the other tiger lying a few feet from me on my left, he having returned to continue the fight for the spoils—I being the spoils. A brief while the two big beasts lay growling and baring their fangs at each other. At intervals the one on my left extended his paw to hook me and drag me away from his rival. Momentarily I expected the beast to succeed in these paw maneuvers, and that then I would serve the means of a tug-o'-war between the two big jungle cats, which would end my life quickly. Having abandoned all hope of escaping alive, I admit that I wished for it so as to have it over with. But always the brute at my right checked the other one's attempts to claw me from him, in the nick of time.

Suddenly the one on my left made an over-bold move to seize me. The other sprang upon him and the next instant the brutes were again engaged in a savage mêlée in the center of the clearing. Then all at once a rifle cracked nearby and one of the cats toppled over. Unconcerned, the other leaped upon him and sank his teeth into the hapless one's throat. Again the rifle cracked. With an agonized snarl the tiger sprang from his now inert competitor and slunk limply toward the undergrowth. Another shot caused him to fall in his tracks.

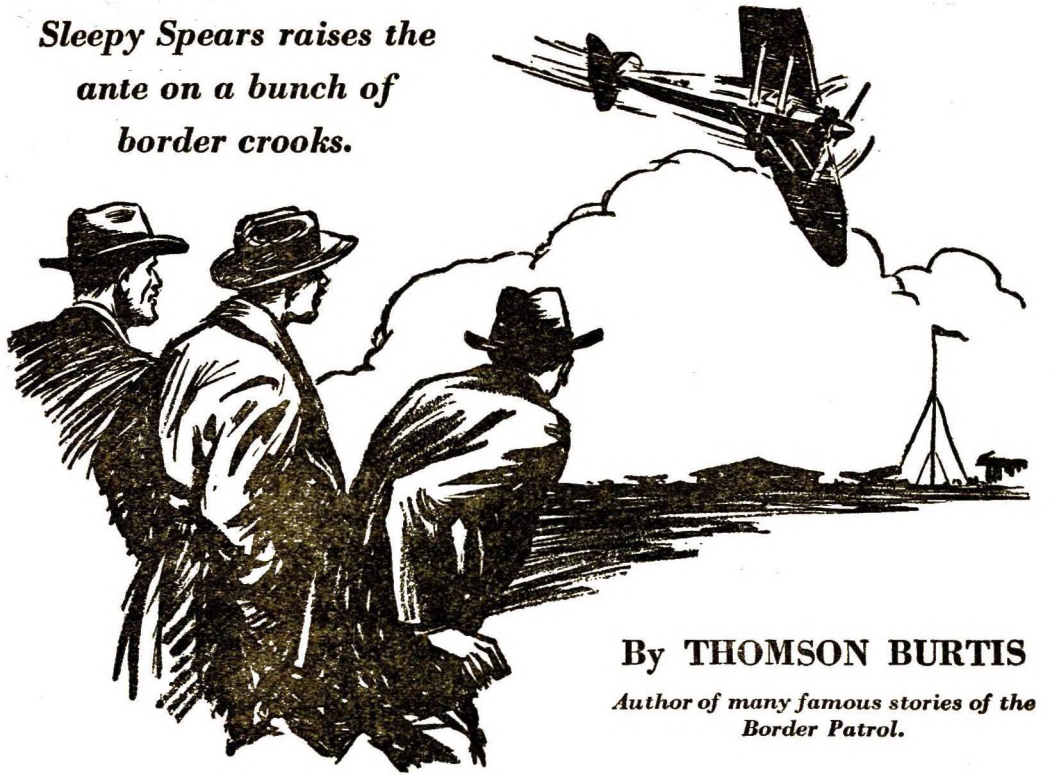
The next minute my mahout was by my side. At the end of a three hundred yard dash old Lady had dumped him off. Retracing his steps he had by the grace of the god of luck found his rifle and had come back to the clearing to look for me. In the trek back to civilization my mahout partly supported me and partly carried me. My physical condition and our bag, brought in later, proved to the satisfaction of all that our tiger-shoot had been as exciting as it had been successful.

—William P. Schramm

$15 For True Adventures

UNDER the heading **Adventurers All,** *the editors of SHORT STORIES will print a new true adventure in every issue of the magazine. Some of them will be written by well known authors, and others by authors for the first time. Any reader of the magazine, any where, may submit one of these true adventures, and for every one accepted the author will be paid $15. It must be written in the first person, must be true, and must be exciting. Do not write more than 1000 words; be sure to type your manuscript on one side of the page only; and address it to: "Adventurers All," Care of Editors of SHORT STORIES Magazine, Garden City, N. Y. Manuscripts which are not accepted will not be returned unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope for that purpose.*

Sleepy Spears raises the ante on a bunch of border crooks.



By THOMSON BURTIS

Author of many famous stories of the Border Patrol.

CUCKOO PAPA

TWO Gargantuan figures were ensconced comfortably in rocking chairs appropriate to their proportions on the porch of a small frame bungalow. The dwelling sprawling in the Texas heat belonged to the Honorable Mr. Samuel Edwards, whose obese form made one of the chairs creak protestingly. The Honorable Samuel had drifted upward through a checkered career to his present incumbency of the mayoralty of McMullen. His companion in crime, wassail, range-riding and divers other pursuits had dropped in for his regular afternoon call. Sheriff Bill Trowbridge, leading minion of the law in Hidalgo County, had formed the habit of conversing with the Honorable Samuel when they were both cowboys, some thirty-five years before, and in all the vicissitudes of their careers he had maintained the custom.

They had been idly discussing the recent inundation of San Antonio, some two hundred and fifty miles northward, with smuggled drugs. The sheriff was rolling a brown cigarette at the moment with one-handed dexterity, finishing the operation by inserting the diminutive cheroot beneath the flowing gray mustache which garnished his weather-beaten, mahogany-tinted face.

"There ain't no article o' ladies' wear been sacred for a month, Sam," he remarked. "I or my dare-devil deputies done peered intuh the innards o' suitcases till there jest ain't no secrets from me. Not a tin o' opium nor an ounce o' snow has gone through McMullen, or any other Hidalgo County town."

"I guess there ain't been near as much fur sale up there, recent, either," remarked Edwards, settling his rotund form more firmly in the chair. "They was sure a mil-

lion dollars worth of it floating around for a while, though."

They relapsed into the comforting silence of old cronies, the sheriff, at least, going over in his mind one of the problems which confronted modern representatives of the law in Texas.

With fifteen hundred miles of border the actual smuggling of drugs across was child's play, but it was his business to see that the getting of it North was a different matter. The hundreds of deserted miles made it easy to get "stuff" valued at millions of dollars into American territory, but, and the sheriff chuckled to himself, what was the use of that if the smugglers could not use the railroads to transport it to their market? These railroads were few, and on them was concentrated much watchfulness on the part of the law.

Many cars were passing the house where the two old friends sat, and a majority of the occupants waved to the old warhorses foregathering on the veranda. It was a smoothly paved boulevard lined with widely-spaced, one-story bungalows, and the variety and class of vehicles passing would have opened the eyes of those effete Northerners who cannot comprehend a border town of ten thousand people in which a majority of the residents do not carry six shooters and ride cowponies.

Firm footfalls coming down the hall heralded the approach of Miss Selinda Moore, maiden sister-in-law of the mayor. She came out on the veranda, and her eagle eye espied two empty glasses with a few remaining lumps of ice therein which the mayor had astutely hidden behind the chairs. She sniffed in a devastating manner. Miss Moore was one of the most versatile and accomplished sniffers that far south. She could indicate disbelief, disapproval, shocked surprise, utter horror, and so on through the gamut of displeasure, through the aid of that one invaluable gesture. Of methods of indicating approval she had no need.

She was departing homeward, and without speaking to the unregenerate occupants of the porch she reached the bottom of the steps.

"Here comes that Spears," she then announced tersely, after a glance up the street. "I s'pose you've heard about the latest debauch he and that Tex MacDowell went on, haven't you, Samuel?"

"Which one did you refer to, Selinda?" queried the mayor, his round red face as innocent as a baby's.

"They got hold o' some money, several hundred dollars, and flew up to Laredo, went over to Nuevo Laredo, an' lost it all gamblin'!" announced the spinster with relish. "An' that's typical o' the gang you and Sally are goin' to let Marjorie marry into. Well, I've said all I'm agoin' to, and——"

Her expounding of her favorite gospel, the unworthiness of youth, was interrupted. What had been a far-off drone, gradually increasing until it had become a vast, deep buzzing, suddenly developed into an all-pervading roar. Like a fleet of prehistoric winged monsters seven De Haviland airplanes, their tremendous Liberty motors shaking the ground with the drumming of eighty-four mighty cylinders, shot across the town. They were less than a hundred feet high, and hurtling through the air at a hundred miles an hour, the impression of resistless power about them caused even Miss Moore to look up and wonder. The planes were in a V-formation, like a flight of gigantic geese, and so close together that as they were flung about in the terrific air-bumps it seemed inevitable that they collide.

The sheriff and Edwards watched them with shining eyes as they disappeared over the buildings, bound for the field at the outskirts of town. A trail of heavy smoke marked their path.

"Yes, that's the gang," stated the sheriff. "It's a shame they're so ungodly, ain't it?"

His twinkling gray eyes, slit-like above the wrinkles which spread profusely in every direction, squinted humorously at the angular spinster.

"How about a shot o' rum, S'linda?" he enquired.

One of Miss Moore's most contemptuous sniffs was his only answer. She proceeded down the walk with energy and enthusiasm. Selinda could carry the potato peelings to the garbage can as though bound on affairs of earth-shaking importance.

From within the house came a snatch of song in a clear, girlish voice.

"Pete Miller is acquirin' an aunt entirely foreign to his convictions," chuckled the mayor, wiping his shining bald head with a handkerchief which was a young tablecloth in size.

"That's Sleepy Spears, all right," remarked Trowbridge, leaning forward to look up the street. "I'd know that rushin' gallop o' his from here to Laredo."

A STOCKY figure was ambling leisurely up the street. Boots, breeches, and shirt of the same dusty brown, added to the big Stetson which he carried negligently in his hand, stamped him as an army man. Even at that distance the lounging walk and drooping shoulders gave an impression of lazy ease. It seemed that the man was resting as he walked.

"Heard about the soirée Selinda was referrin' to, Sam?" enquired the huge sheriff.

"About as much as she told," answered Edwards. "What've those two hellions been up to now, in detail an' without expurgation?"

"Won several hundred in a crap game up to San Antone when they flew up to Donovan Field a couple o' weeks ago. When they got home they allowed that they didn't have enough dinero to do no good, and yet too much to be comfortable with. So they went to Laredo, got over on the Mexican side, an' lost it all gamblin' at the Bee. Tanked up on benedictine and mescal, an' the only thing they can remember clear-like is wakin' up alongside the Laredo House, in an alley, the next mornin'."

Edwards' short, fat body shook like jelly, and the grizzled Trowbridge grinned beneath his flowing mustache. There was a slight wistfulness in his eyes. Both old-timers, ever since the Army Air Service had established a field at McMullen as part of the far-flung border patrol, had lived their own reckless youth over again with the flyers. Twentieth century riders of the range —that was what they saw in the bronzed young fellows who daily watched the seething border country, riding De Havilands through the air instead of ponies on the ground. During the two years of the flight's residence near McMullen, Trowbridge, especially, had been very close to the flyers. To both of the McMullen men there was never-dimming romance in the thought of the spanning of the border, from the Gulf of Mexico to the Gulf of California, by the pick of the country's flyers. Their exploits, their foibles, their faults, all were a delight, for they were modern replicas of the hard working, hard playing young riders of their own youth.

Spears' casual progress down the shimmering street brought him, finally, opposite the house. He waved lazily, and turned in. Above the square, deeply tanned face the thick brown hair was in disorder, and in the set of the black tie, the slight sag of his belt, and the wrinkles of his boots there was a subtle touch of devil-may-care ease.

"Why ain't you cruisin' the ozone, Sleepy?" queried Trowbridge.

Sleepy Spears' heavy-lidded eyes glowed genially, and the slow, wide grin which was the Spears trademark, spread slowly over his face.

"I am suffering with an attack of gout," he said gently. "'Lo, Mayor Edwards."

He slumped to a seat, and his body fell automatically into lines of complete relaxation. Every muscle was limp.

THERE was a famous story of the Air Service which had to do with Sleepy, and never did a man who knew it fail to tell it when describing him, for it epitomized the lounging airman. At a California

field it had been Sleepy's custom, when yearning for recreation, to fly a small scout ship through a disused hangar, both doors of which were always open. Of course it was a reckless flying feat, but Spears was a master-flyer.

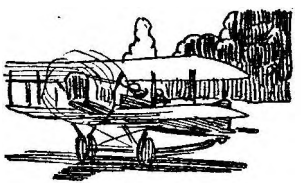
One fine day the doors at one end were shut for some unknown reason. Sleepy popped his little S. E. 5 through the open end, smashed into the doors, and ended up fifty feet away, buried in a mass of wreckage. By a miracle the ship did not catch fire.

When onlookers swarmed to the scene the flyer was emerging from the shambles.

"I knew they'd have those doors shut some day," he said softly, and with a grin lounged off, unhurt and unexcited.

"For what good reason are the law and the powers together?" he now enquired.

"For no good reason, Ambitious," Trowbridge advised him. "If I hadn't had the privilege one time o' seein' you wake up—I'm referrin to that time we chased a murderer by ship, in case it's slipped your defunct mind—I'd be bound to say that the feller which cuts his cigarettes in half so's he won't have to draw the smoke so fur has nothin' on you."



Spears grinned up at the bulk of the sheriff, who was several inches over six feet and built in proportion.

"Ain't you correct? However, I won't call myself really lazy until I get to the point where I throw kisses to girls. Speaking of girls, where's Marjorie?"

"Puttin' on her afternoon war paint," returned Edwards. "Why walkin' in the torrid sun, may I ask? I understand you wake up if the sun so much as gets behind a cloud, you thinkin' it's the night time, but——"

"Car broke down. I never have been able to teach it to run without gas."

"How's things goin' out tuh the field?" asked Trowbridge. "I ain't had a chance to get out and win none o' yore money at poker lately. Been too busy peekin' around among the ladies' lawnjerie fur opium."

"Same as usual," yawned Spears.

Edwards glanced backward and then leaned forward.

"Sleepy, what's ailin' Pete Miller?" he asked in a husky stage whisper. "Marjorie's jest about worried to death, or I'm a sheepherder. He ain't been around none to speak of fur most a week. I think the world o' the boy, but——"

The lazy eyelids were raised, and for a moment gray eyes that were suddenly serious met the level look of the older man.

"Mr. Edwards, I don't know," Sleepy said slowly. He raised a languid hand and ran his fingers through his hair. "He's worried about something, that's a cinch."

There was silence for a moment. Trowbridge reached for his tremendous sombrero, and set it at a reflective angle on his leonine head.

"He's dead in love with Marjorie, an' I know it, but I hate to see him thisaway," went on Edwards, his rubicund face troubled. "An' these flappers knows what it's all about. She ain't nothin' but my niece, but I think as much of her as a daughter an' I hate——"

"Hello, Sleepy my dear," said a lilting voice, and Miss Marjorie Moore bounced out on the veranda in a flurry of flying white skirts.

Spears smiled up into the brown, oval face above him. Marjorie was slim and boyish and eighteen. Glinting brown hair, bobbed and curled, framed an oval face which showed warm color beneath the tan. Beneath the sparkling dark eyes shielded by shapely eyebrows there were now circles of blue, however, and Spears, uncannily observant behind his heavy-lidded eyes, was quick to notice that her usual vivacity was somewhat forced, and that there was a drawn look around her mouth.

"Hello yourself, Marjorie. How's tricks?"

"Not so good," she replied but didn't encourage further questions for the moment.

She perched on the railing, and sat silent while Sleepy, appreciating that something was amiss, exerted himself sufficiently to entertain the sheriff and Edwards with some of the doings at the field.

"Well, I must ramble townward and get some gas," remarked Sleepy finally. "This rest has done me good, though."

"Come inside a moment, will you, old dear?" asked Marjorie.

"Tickled to death. I always did hate chaperons," grinned Sleepy with the freedom of a curiously brother-like relationship which had grown up between himself and the mayor's niece.

In the hall Marjorie turned around to face him, and her eyes were those of a woman as she said abruptly, "Sleepy, do you know what's the matter with Pete?"

"Marjorie, I don't," he returned frankly. "What's he been up to lately?"

"He acts so differently some way. He doesn't come as often and says that he just can't, and——"

There was a break in her voice, and the flyer impulsively put out his hand and patted her shoulder.

"No matter what happens, don't ever worry about what Pete thinks of you, Marjorie," he said gently. "If you could listen to his monologue, you'd know. When I tell you that he's got me where I hate to hear your name mentioned, you'll realize!"

"Do you think that—that maybe he'd tell you——?"

Her hesitant question was not finished, but Sleepy nodded.

"Sure. And maybe I can help him, although I haven't the least idea what it is. Trust your cuckoo-papa, fair flapper."

The fair flapper apparently took great comfort from his assurance, for her smile was like sunshine breaking through the rain.

"Thanks, Sleepy. I—I think a lot of him."

"And he's worth it. Well, so long."

MARJORIE, singing a lilting little song, went upstairs and Sleepy emerged to the porch.

"Do either of you old reprobates, wise in the ways of the world, know what Pete's been doing in town of late evenings?" he enquired. "He hasn't stayed on the field, that's a cinch."

"Not me, except he hasn't been wearin' any holes in the hammock for a couple o' weeks," said Edwards.

"I've seen him runnin' around here and there a little with that young Gray felluh that's been workin' in Ferry's garage the last month, and Peterson. Peterson is livin' at the hotel; he's down here lookin' over prospects for another moving picture theater, he says. Both of 'em seem all-right boys."

"Thanks. So long. When are you coming out to pot a few clay pigeons with us, sheriff, and rake in a few pots, as well?"

"Right soon, son. So long. I'd a heap rather get yore money than have the Bee take it in."

Sleepy grinned without rancor, and walked slowly down the street. To an experienced eye every slow step would have indicated perfectly coördinated muscles, holding potentialities of a high order.

"Marjorie's been talkin' to him about Pete," nodded Edwards.

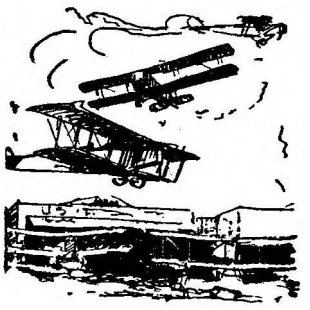
"Uh huh. Ain't it funny how some birds get yore confidence, Sam? That lazy, gamblin', no-account youngster and his sidepardner, Tex, are two hombres I wouldn't object to havin' at my right hand in any circumstances whatsoever or notwithstandin'."

"Good boys. Fellers like them got to break out now and then just to keep from explodin'," agreed Edwards, watching the flyer's disappearing form with understanding eyes.

"When he gets in action, ain't it a pretty sight though?" asked the sheriff oratorically. "That time him and me flew up the line to see old Billy and run into that robbery and near-murder, I never see a

man change so. Sleepy was a hundred and fifty pounds o' dynamite, and after we caught up with the bird by airplane he done the prettiest flyin' I ever see."

"I know. Well, he saves up enough energy ninety percent o' the time tuh have plenty when he does break loose," chuckled His Honor. "I hope he straightens Pete out. Right mysterious, ain't it, about him?"



Which was exactly the conclusion Lieutenant Sleepy Spears came to about half way out to McMullen. He had obtained gas, and was in his own car. The dilapidated vehicle resembled its owner in many ways. It looked like a weather-beaten, unpainted remnant of a car, about to fall to pieces at the slightest opportunity. But the engine ran with smoothly flowing power, and the long, rakish roadster could step off a good road above eighty miles an hour.

It passed the guard at the entrance to the small airdrome in a cloud of dust, and roared down the road which skirted the line of unpainted board buildings on the southern edge of the field. Two long rows of tents—officers' quarters—could be seen at the end of the line. The sandy field, totally without vegetation, was bounded to the east and west by rusty-looking metal hangars. The line in front of the eastern row of hangars was the scene of bustling activity as scores of enlisted men trundled the big bombers which had just landed, into their sheds.

Sleepy drew up in front of headquarters, stopped his engine, and went in to look for any mail which might have arrived. This accomplished, with the usual barren result, he lounged over to his tent. All the flyers were apparently obsessed by the same idea: a bath and clean clothes.

Sleepy's tent was in its usual state of complete disarray. Despite the untiring efforts of the Chink factotum who served as waiter in the mess and chambermaid in the tents, Sleepy's tent was never in a state approximating order.

He undressed leisurely, throwing his clothing into various corners with measured, thoughtful motions. Donning a tattered brown bathrobe, he set sail down the boardwalk to the bathhouse, carrying towels and soap. He stopped for a moment by Miller's tent, but his hail got no answer.

The bathhouse was occupied by several young men whose necks and faces were of a uniform shade of deep brown, contrasting sharply with the white skin beneath. Over in a corner was Miller, shaving.

"Here's the goldbrick," someone remarked. "How did you wake up so early? The sun hasn't set——"

"That singing was enough to wake me up if I'd been taking a nap in Brownsville. Hello, Pete. Why don't you include that mustache in your operations?"

"That's what gives the final touch to me fatal beauty, and is more than half responsible for my magnetic attraction," returned Miller.

It was a typical answer from the little flyer, but in the glass his shadowed eyes held no hint of mirth. He was shaving rapidly, as though unbearably nervous.

WITHOUT further comment Sleepy applied himself to the business of bathing. That curiously panther-like quality in his body was very obvious now. The long muscles rippled in silky strength beneath his skin, and the slowness of his movements made the impression of slumbering power more striking.

Miller had finished shaving and bathing and was on his way back to his tent long before Sleepy turned off the water. His mind was busy trying to map out a campaign whereby he might insinuate himself into Miller's confidence. For over a week he had been subconsciously aware that the laughing youngster, whom he had never

known to have a thing on his mind nor to be anything but his heedless self, was changing. More and more he had shunned his comrades, and it was almost a nightly occurrence for him to slip off to town without giving the slightest indication of where he was going. Now that Marjorie had mentioned it, the fact was very plain that Miller had become more and more nervous and distraught until he was totally unlike his old self.

Sleepy was fond of Miller—everybody was. And his was not a nature to become easily affected by the ordinary blows of fortune. Time after time Sleepy had seen him lose his last dime in a poker game, or emerge second best in some affair of the heart, and never had the little flyer lost his careless smile or the merry gleam in his eyes. That is, until recently.

At dinner Sleepy took no part in the ceaseless flow of badinage, but under cover of it watched Miller closely. His actions became more and more significant. Spears had not realized the completeness of his fellow-airman's metamorphosis. He ate almost nothing, and was as nervous as a man could be and refrain from getting up and moving around. Now and again he would toss in a remark, but it seemed an effort and he appeared relieved when the conversation passed him by. Spears noticed stocky Captain Kennard, the C. O., watching his youngest flyer occasionally, and wondered whether the captain was striving to get to the bottom of the problem as well. Now that he thought of it, even the physical change in Miller was very apparent. His tanned cheeks held deep hollows in them, and there was an unhealthy glitter in the sunken eyes.

Miller had just pushed his untouched dessert away and was folding his napkin when Sleepy asked, "I'm running into town tonight. Want a lift in, Pete?"

"Thanks, I would. Be ready in a minute."

He lit a cigarette with hands that trembled slightly. He seemed like a stranger among the dozen other flyers. Their poise and self-assurance was in marked contrast to his nervousness. He was without that indefinable mark of the flyer now; the zest and calm, level-eyed competence of those whose daily business it is to meet and surmount danger were gone from him.

"Meet you at the car in five minutes, Sleepy," he said over his shoulder as he walked out with short, choppy strides.

"Pete's on the warpath lately," remarked big George Hickman, an observer.

Sleepy held his peace. For a moment he had an impulse to confide in Captain Kennard, but finally decided against it. As he excused himself and went out into the velvet softness of the night he grinned.

"Pete's such an infernal kid he needs a little looking after, but damned if I don't feel foolish," he mused.

He was already in civilian clothes, which he wore habitually in the evening, and did not bother to go after a hat. He smoked a reflective cigarette standing alongside the car, and waited for his charge. Hangar-lights winked through the heavy mantle of the moonless night, and the reflection of McMullen was plain against the sky, three miles away. It seemed a sacrilege to think of a man being in mental agony in surroundings so peaceful. Suddenly the lounging flyer felt a wave of sympathy for the troubled youngster who was even now approaching through the dusk.

"Ready?" barked Miller.

"Uh huh. Climb in."

IN A moment they were off. Sleepy felt for an opening as he talked, but he received only monosyllabic replies. His companion seemed immersed in his thoughts; any answer at all was an effort. Two or three times Spears was on the point of asking an abrupt question, but he resisted the impulse.

"Want to be dropped at Edwards'?" he asked casually as they wound through the shack-lined streets of the Mexican quarter.

"No, I want to get off at the hotel," answered Miller.

"I haven't a thing in the world to do. Might as well get off at the hotel myself and see what's doing. Anything special on?"

"May be a poker game. I—I've been playing a little with some fellows."

"Anybody I know?'

"I don't know. Ralph Gray—the fellow that works in Ferry's garage—and a friend of his named Simpson, and Peterson. I guess you've met Peterson. He's thinking of starting another movie theater here. They——"

He did not finish the sentence, but sat motionless, looking straight ahead.

"I didn't know you were gambling in town," laughed Sleepy. "Why not let me in on it? You know my weakness. Been doing any good?"

Miller shook his head.

They turned into the wide main street. Ahead a double row of clustered street lights converged a mile away. They illuminated well-peopled sidewalks, and competed with a continuous row of shining store-windows and a respectable array of electric signs. As they made their way through the traffic there were many greetings flung at them, for McMullen had much personal and civic pride in the fact that a flight of the border patrol was quartered there. The flyers had become a very real part of the life of the thriving town.

The streets presented the curious contrast of all border towns. Relics of the old days were frequent in booted and spurred men and standing cowponies, to say nothing of stores where saddles and blankets and other equipment of a rancher occupied the windows. Other emporiums displayed the newest in gowns or furniture. A costly limousine was parked next to a hitching rack alongside a watering trough.

The hotel, set well back from the street and fronted by a smooth lawn, loomed like a pale fairy palace. It was built of gray stucco, in the Spanish style, and surrounded a patio. The spraying fountain in the center was visible from the street, with glimpses of the surrounding verandas on two stories.

Sleepy parked his car on a side street, and fell into step with Miller.

"Saw Marjorie today," he remarked. "Said she hadn't been seeing much of you lately."

He could have sworn that Miller flinched as though from a blow. The little airman said nothing, and Sleepy did not press the point.

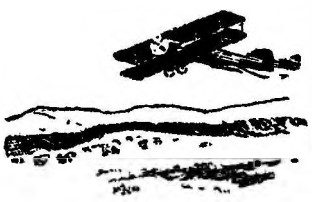
"I'll call up Peterson's room," Miller said as they entered the small lobby.

"I'll wait here for you. I don't want to butt in, but if they haven't too many customers I'd enjoy playing a few."

"Sure. It'll be all right."

Sleepy dropped into a chair and looked over a San Antonio paper which someone had left in the next seat. There was the usual number of murders, divorces and acts of Congress listed, as well as a leading article about the investigation of the drug ring which was supposed to be responsible for the fact that half a million dollars worth of drugs for distribution throughout the country had been found in a small hotel a month before.

This same fact being responsible for doubling the work of the patrol, and, still more directly, the cause of Sleepy's being compelled to arise on the morrow at five-thirty to go on an added early morning mission, he skimmed over the article. The authorities had so far apprehended no culprits whom they believed to be big game, but they had been able to discover that for months a huge amount of drugs had reached San Antonio from the Gulf of Mexico and the border. For nearly a month every train and automobile coming into San Antonio had been investigated, and all the forces of law and order had been prodded into unceasing activity. As a result, the inundation had apparently



been cut off successfully. At least, no further contraband had been discovered.

"Well, I hope they find out something definite soon," mused Sleepy, stretching luxuriously. "This double-patrol stuff cuts into my time. I——"

"Lieutenant Spears, Mr. Peterson," Miller's voice was saying, and Sleepy arose to shake hands with a big, red-faced man of indeterminate age, who greeted him energetically and laughed loudly for no particular reason.

"I'm glad to meet you, Lieutenant. I've been hearing a lot about you ever since I hit town," he said with blatant heartiness. "D'you know Ralph Gray?"

"I've seen him around," smiled Spears, shaking hands with the swarthy, foreign-looking mechanic.

"Sleepy here has nothing to do and he's a poker player, so I took the liberty of inviting him in," said Miller, lighting another cigarette from the glowing butt of the one he had been smoking. He seemed to be always in the act of lighting another one.

"Fine business!" boomed Peterson. "Come up to the room."

He hooked his arm in Spears', which caused that lazy, reserved flyer no pleasure whatever. "Old Manners," was his expression for that vast army of spaciously genial and entirely too familiar men to whom every slight acquaintance becomes a friend.

He further sized up Miller's cronies as they went up in the elevator. Peterson's round, red face was surmounted by thin, sandy hair, and he smoked a fat cigar with the band still on it. His eyes, seeming rather small in the fleshy face, were light gray and did not always reflect the ready laughter. He was carefully tailored and manicured. Gray was dressed quietly in blue serge, and was rather handsome in a dark way. His eyes were black as night, as was his hair and mustache. He wore his hair rather long, and one hand was constantly busy with his mustache.

Peterson's room was a large one, and held a big wardrobe trunk and a suitcase in addition to the regular furnishings. The theater man talked incessantly, overwhelming the reserved Spears with flattering references to various flying feats Peterson had heard about. He was mixing cocktails while talking.

He had just finished his self-appointed task when there came a knock at the door. In answer to Peterson's bellowed invitation a tall, slim young fellow with a much-freckled face entered.

"'Lo, Simp. We been waiting for you. Meet Lieutenant Spears—you've heard of him."

SIMPSON acknowledged the introduction, took off his hat and sat down. He had fiery red hair, and a huge pair of ears that were ludicrous in contrast to his small head and thin body. He accepted a drink, and kept his peace. Sleepy was sunk deep in a chair, sipping the cocktail slowly and sizing up his surroundings. He noted that Miller tossed all his drink in a gulp and that Peterson was pouring him another.

Spears had a double motive in joining the game. The principal one was that he was ready to play poker at any time, anywhere, and with anybody. And along with that perfectly obvious reason there was the underlying thought that perhaps he might stumble across some clue as to what was worrying Miller. Although these men seemed all right, there was a chance that something might turn up which would give him a gleam of light to follow. The more he watched and pondered, the more he believed that the young flyer was in serious trouble.

And so, as the game started, he was alert beneath the mask of heavy lids and lounging body. It was draw poker, table stakes, with a twenty dollar take out and the privilege of announcing any amount back of one's hand. Everyone promptly announced fifty dollars.

Sleepy got no hands worth playing for a half hour, and devoted his time to watch-

ing the others. His unobtrusive scrutiny of the cards had so far yielded no mark, and he was fairly familiar with the various methods of marking. Nobody had won or lost over ten dollars at the end of twenty minutes, and there had been absolutely nothing suspicious about anyone's play. Peterson maintained a flow of conversation, discussing each bet and draw before making it, while the other two contested quietly. Miller played as though drawn to the breaking point. He seemed barely able to wait until the next hand was dealt, and he picked up his cards with feverish eagerness.

Came a hand which caused Sleepy to ponder a bit. Peterson opened on Gray's deal. Miller stayed. Spears threw down, and Simpson raised the pot five dollars. Peterson stayed, after much lamenting, as did Miller. Both Peterson and Miller drew three cards, Simpson two.

To Sleepy's surprise Peterson, instead of checking, bet ten dollars. Miller called. Simpson promptly raised the pot twenty dollars, and Peterson re-raised another twenty. Miller threw down, showing Sleepy three jacks.

Simpson hesitated, and then silently threw his hand into the deck. By some accident it fell face up. Before Simpson's quick hand had turned it over the alert Spears caught the cards—a pair of sixes, an ace, a three and a five.

"So friend Simp's a bluffer," nodded Sleepy to himself.

Peterson, laughing loudly, threw his hand into the deck. Some impulse caused Sleepy to reach out his hand for the cards as Peterson started to gather up the deck.

"Openers?" he asked quietly.

"Oh, pardon me!" said the jovial Peterson, showing them. "Pair of queens, and nothing more. Got to protect yourself in this game!"

He laughed as though hugely pleased with himself. Simpson and Miller bought another stack of chips from Peterson, who was banker. Peterson noted the amount on a sheet of paper. Everyone was to settle at the end of the game.

"Huh! Raising and re-raising on nothing, with Pete in the middle with the best hand," soliloquized Sleepy.

He dropped lower in his chair, and the guilelessness of his square face seemed more lazy and childlike than ever. He played but little. In the first place, he had less than a hundred dollars to his name until next payday, and in the second place he wanted to do a little heavy observing, as he expressed it. He bought another stack to fortify himself in the event of a good hand, and settled down to his knitting.

Twice in the next half-hour, with the size of the bets creeping upward as more chips were bought, two of the three strangers indulged in a re-raising bout until Miller was forced out on fairly good hands. Both times Simpson was the opener. Once he held a pair of aces, and won the pot after a re-raise of thirty-five dollars, causing Peterson, who had raised Simpson's original bet, to lay down. Miller, who had called Peterson, laid down three queens. The other time Simpson had kings up, and lay down to Gray after Miller had been forced out.

"When Miller shows a disposition to string along after the first raise, they run for cover. When he acts as though he didn't have much confidence in his hand—just calls—they keep on raising," soliloquized Sleepy. "And Pete's meat for that sort of work."

Miller was not a good poker player. He was of the type who waits for good cards, and then plays them conservatively. Consequently he was easy to figure. When he raised, or called a big bet, the pot was his. He knew nothing of varying his play, and the art of bluffing was unknown to him. Inasmuch as a great majority of hands which a poker player may expect to get have no great value, and yet often are worthy of a play if the opener only has a pair, Miller was continuously piddling his money away. Unless he had better than

three of a kind, he would invest anywhere from five to fifteen dollars, only to lay down to the other men.

AT the end of two hours Sleepy was satisfied that the other three players were playing together against Miller and himself. He lay low, but on any hand better than jacks up he called them. Due to their re-raising habits on small hands, he won often enough to put him ahead, for one of those pots was worth something. It took nerve to stand a number of raises on two pairs, but he had the courage of his convictions.

He was also convinced of another thing. They must have some method of signaling back and forth as to what they had. Never did one of them raise more than once when another had a good hand. It was only when there was no hand as good as threes among them that they started to make money win for them.

This being decided, Sleepy lolled back further in his chair, his eyelids dropped lower until it seemed as though he were asleep, and his demeanor became more calm and disinterested. However, there was not a movement or a word that escaped him. He watched their eyes, their hands, their every action. He took part in very few pots, but his stack was now nearly a hundred dollars, which put him sixty dollars ahead.

He was willing to let Miller play along, regardless of how much he lost, until he had figured the strangers' game exactly. Then it would be time enough to take suitable steps. He was convinced now that the root of the flyer's worries would be found right there in that game. Miller was playing with strained eagerness, and as time went on and his losings grew steadily larger, his face became more and more haggard. He was a player who *had* to win—and was losing.

It was eleven forty-five when Sleepy finally decided that he had the combination. It had been agreed that midnight was to mark the end of the game, so he said casually, "Well, it's pretty near quitting time. Are you gentlemen playing tomorrow night? If you are, and you don't object to my butting in again, I might drop around."

"Why—er—sure," said Peterson, with barely observable hesitation. "I guess we'll be rifflin' 'em again tomorrow night. How about it, boys?"

Gray nodded, as did Simpson. Their demeanor was in marked contrast to the persistent loud geniality of Peterson.

"I'd like to play," said Miller, picking up the new hand. He glanced through it tensely. A smothered sigh that was almost a groan escaped him, and he dropped them hopelessly.

Those last few hands confirmed Sleepy in his belief that he had solved the crooks' method of working. He contributed fifteen dollars in calling Gray, to make sure. When the supposed mechanic showed him a flush his last doubts were swept away.

Their frame-up was simplicity itself. When the hands were dealt, each man looked through his cards quickly. If he held nothing, the hand was held practically folded, so that the value of the cards could be told only by the corners. On any hand, from openers up to small threes, as nearly as Sleepy could figure it, the hand was held spread widely, and in the left hand. On a good hand—big threes or better—the hand was held in the right hand.

BY THIS means they were in a position to do a number of very advantageous things, aside from forcing an outsider out by means of two small hands re-raising each other to a prohibitive extent. Time and again, when one of the three had signaled a good hand and another openers, the good hand would pass, only to raise the pot after it had been opened. At other times, when the good hand was forced to open, one of the others, with nothing, would raise a small amount before the draw—just enough to inveigle the luckless Miller in for a little more money.

The three of them were simply steadily

milking Miller's money from him, in small amounts. They were skilful in judging when his hand was good enough to cause him to stick, and wasted but little money. Inasmuch as Miller required a very good hand to stand more than one raise, their evening had been a very successful one.

"As to tomorrow evening—that's another matter!" Sleepy remarked to himself as he started counting up his chips.

Simpson was ten dollars behind, Peterson a hundred and forty dollars ahead, Gray sixty-seven dollars to the good, and Sleepy himself had thirty-two dollars to reward him for his evening's work. Miller had lost two hundred and twenty-nine dollars.

"Just make out your check less my thirty-two, Pete," said Spears. "It'll save bookkeeping, and we'll fix it up later."

Miller's hand shook as he made out the check. Spears, watching him, was wondering.

"This is the twenty-third of the month. If Pete has that much money in the bank, it'll be the first time he ever did, with payday so near," he was thinking.

"Can I see you just a minute privately, Miller?" asked Peterson.

"Sure," was the lifeless answer.

"'Scuse us," said Peterson, and led the little flyer out into the hall.

"Pete sort of gave the party, didn't he?" queried Sleepy, blinking sleepily.

"Seems that way," assented Gray, lighting a cigarette.

"I contributed my bit," Simpson put in quickly.

"Poker chips have no home," said Gray. "Win today, lose tomorrow."

Peterson and Miller came back into the room. Miller's face was flushed, and Peterson wore a wide smile. The lounging Spears saw him meet the eyes of Gray and Simpson. It seemed as if they had asked him a question, and that the flashed answer was satisfactory.

"Well, we'll see you all tomorrow night," boomed Peterson. "Have another drink before you go?"

"I've got the early morning patrol, so I won't, thanks," said Sleepy. Miller, however, accepted the invitation.

THEY said good-night, and went downstairs. Sleepy noted that neither Gray nor Simpson had made any move toward leaving. "Let's take a little ride and blow some of the whisky and cigarette smoke out of our systems," he suggested.

Apparently he had every intention of doing just that, for he sent the clattering roadster down the smooth, deserted boulevard at sixty miles an hour. Sleepy was hunched down loosely behind the big wheel, in an attitude of complete relaxation, but he handled the big car with easy skill and without apparent effort, either physical or mental.

There was an abrupt change in Miller. He talked continuously, in marked contrast to his former silence. On the whole, he seemed to be feeling more like himself—and yet he had lost a large amount of money. Sleepy said little, but thought much.

He was still groping for an explanation of the problem when they reached the field. However, there were one or two things that would account for the various facts which he had definitely decided upon when he drew up alongside headquarters—he never bothered to put the car in the garage—and said good-night.

"Maybe I ought to have told Pete about those crooks, but there's some things I want to get hep to," he mused as he undressed. "Tomorrow's time enough. Damn that early patrol!"

In less than a minute after he had set and wound the alarm clock and eased himself into bed he was sound asleep. Nothing ever interfered with Spears' rest.

HE AWOKE a few moments before the summons of the bell, a premonition of evil within him. It took him several seconds of yawning thought to run down the cause thereof. When he had finally remembered that he was forced to arise at the ungodly hour of five-thirty he sighed resignedly and slowly emerged from the warm shelter of the blankets. He was already on his way out of the tent when the clock burst into clanging life. He cut it off, and made his slow way to the bath-house, there to dance for a chilly moment beneath a stinging flood of cold water. Pop Cravath came in as he was rubbing himself for dear life.

"They don't spare even the aged and infirm on these midnight soirées, do they?" he remarked.

"Nor the victims of hookworms," rejoined Cravath, who had reached the advanced age of thirty. "You ought to be pretty well awake, though; it's still more night than day."

"Uh huh. See you in the mess-hall."

While he was fishing various articles of attire from divers corners of his tent, his mind was at work once more on the problem of Pete Miller. As soon as the patrol was over, he would start on a definite trail, he decided. If he found out what he was after, he'd go direct to Miller. Not a very pleasant job.

He started for the mess-hall, arrayed in a made-to-order serge shirt which was open at the neck and wrinkled into weird patterns; a twenty dollar Stetson dented according to his own private ideas, which did not even approximate the uniform regulations; a pair of Bedford cord breeches which had been bathed in oil so frequently that they were now of a mousy neutrality in color, and field boots which folded negligently about his ankles. He carried helmet and goggles in his hand, and likewise a belt which held a Colt automatic. Emergency rations and a serviceable gun are necessities on the border patrol.

Cravath, who was to be his observer on the flight, joined him in the mess-hall, where eggs, toast, and coffee were set forth for their delectation by the fat Chink cook. Halfway through the hasty meal a sudden roar came to their ears, gradually decreasing to a barely perceptible hum. The warm-up of their motor had started.

As they started for the line where one lone De Haviland was standing, the big Liberty gradually extended itself under Sergeant Cary's careful hand until it was roaring along wide-open. Swirls of dust billowed upward, and the three mechanics, whose duty it was to hold the ship, buckled to their task. The huge tires flattened themselves against the blocks, and from the exhaust pipes showers of sparks, and then a continuous streak of flame poured out into the half-light.

Both listened mechanically to the even firing of the twelve mighty cylinders. Cary nodded as he climbed out of the cockpit and Sleepy took his place. The pilot threw him the Stetson, and adjusted helmet and goggles. Cravath got his board and materials ready to make notes, and took a brief look at the wireless equipment.

Sleepy opened the throttle halfway, tried the motor on each switch separately, and then his eyes swept the instrument board. Oil pressure twenty-five, air pump working perfectly, according to the gauge, and the temperature creeping toward eighty—the flyer's Bible read correctly. The voltmeter was charging a bit high, but that would go down after they got started.

Sleepy nodded, and the wheelblocks were pulled. With all the mechanics holding to the right wing, Sleepy gave his ship the gun, and with right rudder aided them to turn the ship. He noticed Tex MacDowell and Hickman going into the mess-hall, and another D. H. being trundled forth from the hangar. Tex and Hickman had the eastward patrol to the Gulf. At Laredo, Marfa, Sanderson, El Paso and on out to California, other young men would be going through the same ritual, and before two hours were over the entire border would have been patroled, and every inch of it scrutinized from three thousand feet

—that is, unless there proved to be something that required a closer look.

THE bomber trundled its way to the northern edge of the field, and turned. When it was headed southeast, so that the Gulf breeze could be taken advantage of on the take-off, Sleepy shoved the throttle ahead slowly. The ton-and-a-half ship picked up speed in a trice; in response to the pressure on the stick the tail came up and the D. H. was scudding across the hard-packed sand at seventy miles an hour. Sleepy eased back on the stick the merest trifle, and they were in the air.

The tachometer read seventeen hundred revolutions a minute as they flashed straight toward headquarters building. Handling the stick so smoothly that there was not the slightest jerkiness noticeable, the pilot lifted his ship in a zoom that carried them above the line of buildings, two hundred feet high. For a moment he remained intent on his instrument board until he had throttled the motor to an easy fifteen hundred revs., adjusted the motor shutters so that the temperature would stay at 80 degrees Centigrade, and devoted a full fifteen seconds to observation of the air pressure. The needle stayed firmly at three pounds, the oil had leaped up to thirty, and all was well.

He circled the field but once, and then, a thousand feet high, turned westward for his hundred-mile beat toward Laredo. Behind him the owlish looking Cravath was already conning the earth through the ground mist. Sleepy sank somnolently into the cockpit, and did not deign to look at the receding earth as the great ship drove westward at a hundred and ten miles an hour.

They flew for nearly an hour, straightening the curves of the Rio Grande by flying far enough north of it to maintain a straight course. Open fields gave way to far-billowing mesquite, and isolated cabins replaced painted ranch-houses. The sun started burning away the mist, and its rays flashed from the twisted silver thread of the river. Three thousand feet high now, and below them a painted world, its every detail distinct for a radius of seven miles in every direction. They could see for a much greater distance than that, but only indistinctly. That is, Cravath could. Sleepy didn't look. He did keep close tabs on his instruments, and his ears were always alert to notice any break in the even drumming of the Liberty, for there were long stretches when the slightest failure in that huge but unbelievably delicate mechanism would mean hurtling into the trees at seventy miles an hour, or plunging into the narrow watercourse.

WHEN the big bend of the river which marked the end of their patrol came in sight Cravath unwound the wireless antennæ, and ticked off the message that all was well. There had been no activity at all.

Sleepy banked, and started homeward. His casual sweeping of the western horizon failed to pick up the Laredo ship which handled the territory on westward.

On the way back, obeying an impulse which was the result of his utter boredom, Sleepy dove steeply, until he was only a hundred feet high, directly above the river, then he settled down to work. The ship swept along above the river, but rarely on an even keel, for the pilot was following every curve of the stream. In continuous banks so steep they were almost vertical the De Haviland twisted and turned on itself as though dodging a pursuer. To an onlooker it would have seemed that the occupants must be thrown out, but as a matter of fact the maneuvers were accomplished with the smoothness that is the final test of expert airmanship. Neither slip nor skid marred the flight as the ship tilted to right and left on its crazy way. Cravath, accustomed to the idiosyncrasies of his pilot, kept watch of the ground and enjoyed himself.

Men in the fields, and occasional wondering Mexicans, waved at them now, for the business of that part of the world was

afoot. There were vehicles along the San Elizabeth road, and in the fields teams and men were starting the day's work.

Finally McMullen came in sight, and Sleepy turned northward. He circled the field with motor wide open to burn out any excess oil that might have accumulated, and as a final test for any weakness which might have been developed on the flight. He went five hundred yards north of the field, turned, and with motor cut to a thousand revolutions dove for the field. Gradually the throttle crept back until the motor was idling as the ship dropped across the fence and straightened out a foot above the ground. With the instinct of the veteran flyer Sleepy felt the sudden hovering which heralded a drop to earth, and pulled back on the stick for that most skillful of flying feats—a perfect three-point landing.

"Motor working O. K.," he told Cary and the crew as he climbed out. "That flying wire in the second bay needs tightening, and the landing wires vibrate too much. Tighten 'em and then check the rigging."

"You must be feeling good this morning," remarked Cravath, unbuckling the pistol belt from his rotund form.

"I get fed up with just sitting there," yawned Sleepy. "All was quiet along the Potomac, I suppose."

"Uh huh."

They walked to headquarters, where Sleepy took a look at his mail box, and then leisurely surveyed the bulletin board. It was only a little after eight o'clock, and most of the airmen were just finishing breakfast. Sleepy dropped in for a cup of coffee and a cigarette, asked for and received permission to go to town at ten o'clock, and then lounged over to his tent. Having shed helmet and goggles and gun, he washed the thick coat of oil from his face and went over to the men's mess-hall. He was mess officer.

His custom when assigned to a job was to get a good sergeant if he did not inherit one with the job, devote as much hard work as necessary to the training of his subordinate, and then just supervise. By this method he did less work and, on the average, had a more efficient department than those men who worked like mad trying to do everything themselves.

Half an hour was sufficient to check the accounts, look over the menu for the day, and inspect the mess-hall. Sergeant Butler had been taught, coaxed, flattered and cursed into a treasure of a mess sergeant.

THESE onerous duties accomplished, Spears wasted no time in embarking for town. He approached the bank at forty miles an hour, and then made a miraculously smooth stop alongside the curb. He did not particularly relish the subterfuge before him, but it was necessary.

Baker, the paying teller, greeted him cordially.

"Oh, pretty fair; don't feel a day over sixty," the flyer responded to Baker's "How are you?" "I'd like to have a statement, please, and also one for Pete Miller, if you don't mind."

"Sure thing."

The bald little teller propelled his rotund form into the bookkeeping department, and in a few moments returned with the desired statements. Sleepy thanked him, got into his car, and drove back toward the field. Halfway out he stopped and opened the unsealed envelope marked "Lieutenant Peter F. Miller." A quick look at the cancelled check and the statement told the truth. Miller had made no deposits since his paycheck on the first of the month, and he was $24.85 overdrawn. Furthermore, the check for two hundred and twenty-nine dollars which he had given the night

before was not noted on the statement.

The remainder of the trip to the field was made at the slowest pace at which the car had been driven for a long time.

"Pete's been playing a lot with that bunch, and it's a cinch he's been losing steadily," Sleepy mused as he automatically guided the car. "There isn't a check made out to that gang, either. Consequently, they must be holding several hundred dollars' worth of no-good paper. If they're out primarily for money, why in the world should they pick on Pete, and Pete alone? What's their big idea? What do they figure to get out of him? The money can be fixed up all right——"

He returned the guard's salute as he turned into the field, still deep in thought. A ship was taking off in a cloud of dust as he turned into his open-air garage alongside headquarters. Suddenly the motor spit and missed as the De Haviland shot upward in a steep climbing turn. Spears, suddenly as motionless as though turned to stone, watched. That most deadly of flying mishaps—motor failure on the take-off with no landing field ahead—had happened. The ship was less than two hundred feet high; not half enough altitude to make a turn back into the field.

The pilot did not come out of the bank. The ship was headed westward, tilted steeply for the turn, and the field was a ninety degree turn north.

The De Haviland settled earthward in a sideslip, turning slightly toward the field. Fifty feet high, and headed northwest, the pilot brought it out of the bank and in a terrific flat skid strove to head it into the field. The motor was dead.

Sleepy joined the men who had suddenly erupted from buildings and tents and were rushing toward the scene of the coming wreck. An ambulance appeared from alongside a hangar.

The pilot was successful in his effort. The ship hit the ground in the skid, and the landing gear was wiped off with a crash. The airplane slithered along the ground, the wings crumpling. Before the rescuers were anywhere near the wreck both occupants of the machine were out to escape a probable fire. The pilot—was it Miller?—fell as he hit the ground.

"Damn good flying!" shouted the relieved Spears to Captain Kennard, and the puffing captain grinned assent.

Had the pilot obeyed a natural instinct and tried to turn into the field, diving instead of sideslipping, the ship would have inevitably hit nose first, and the motor, with equal certainty, would have telescoped back and crushed him. To say nothing of a probable exploded gas tank.

"Sprained ankle, I guess!" shouted Miller, for he was the pilot.

His face was white with pain, but he grinned.

They lifted him carefully and carried him to the ambulance. Mechanics with fire extinguishers stood ready while others made sure that the switches were cut and the gas tank intact. The passenger, a mechanic, was unhurt.

Major Sims, the flight surgeon, made a brief examination.

"Just the ankle—keep you from walking around for a few days!" he said cheerily.

Miller's face grew suddenly tense.

"Can't I fly tomorrow? I wanted to go to San Antonio—Captain Kennard gave me permission."

"Not a chance!" stated the gray-haired doctor positively. "Now we'll go over and fix this up."

The ambulance trundled away, and Sleepy turned toward headquarters.

"He seemed damned anxious to get to San Antonio tomorrow," he thought. "Well, as soon as he gets back in his tent we'll see what we shall see."

An hour later he found Miller on the bed in his tent, staring at the ceiling.

" 'Lo, Pete. Congratulations. That was flying."

Miller grunted, and twisted restlessly. His ankle was tightly bound, and he was careful not to move it.

"I'm sure out of luck!" he said bitterly.

Sleepy took a chair, and stretched out

comfortably. He lit his pipe, a battered meerschaum of uncertain age, and stretched out comfortably.

"Cheer up, Pete. I've got a lot of good news."

"Huh?"

"Sure thing. First, though, how much have you lost in that poker game with Peterson and those birds? The reason that I ask is that Baker, down at the bank this morning, asked me to tell you you were twenty-four eighty-five overdrawn. He gave me your statement. And I knew that check of yours last night couldn't have got in yet. I was at the bank as soon as it opened."

He averted his eyes from the tortured young face before him. Then he said quickly, "But don't worry about money. I told you I had good news. But Pete, as man to man, where do you stand in that game?"

For a moment the crippled airman did not answer. Then, as if throwing a load from his shoulders, he said tonelessly, "About thirteen hundred dollars, Sleepy."

Spears' face did not reflect his amazement in the slightest.

"Any more checks out, Pete?"

"Thirteen hundreds' worth."

Sleepy surveyed the glowing bowl of his pipe for a moment.

"How come?" he asked quietly.

Miller found it difficult to talk. He twisted restlessly, and then caught himself with a groan of pain as his ankle rebelled.

"Those fellows are holding 'em!" he burst forth suddenly. "I might as well tell you—everybody'll know it tomorrow!" he went on in a rush of words.

"Sure; I don't talk much, and don't forget—there's probably a way out," came Spears' voice soothingly.

"How much do you know?" demanded Miller.

"Not much, but go ahead."

"Well, I met these fellows—Peterson first—and they were damn nice to me. Finally we got to playing poker. I shouldn't have started. I was starting to save this month so—so Marjorie and I could get married quicker, but I—I thought I might win something and—and we could get married still quicker. What a fool I was!"

THERE was silence for a moment after that bitter phrase of self-recrimination. Miller stole a look at Sleepy, but that young gentleman was gazing tranquilly at the opening in the roof of the tent, and apparently had nothing weightier on his mind than the enjoyment of his pipe.

"Well, I lost every game," Miller resumed doggedly. "At the end of the second game I told 'em I was through. Peterson told me the checks hadn't been cashed and to come ahead and play. He had the biggest share of 'em, and said he'd fix it up with the others. Said he had plenty of money, and just played for fun and that I was sure to win some time, and I could pay what I might happen to owe any old time—he was going to be in McMullen a long time in the moving picture business, and all that stuff. And I went ahead, and got in deeper and deeper. It sounds like an alibi and kid stuff and all that, Sleepy, but so help me I was thinking of Marjorie and—and getting back that money so we could be married quicker. I'd have quit and stayed here at the field and given 'em every cent of my salary without thinking about it, otherwise.

"About a week ago Peterson commenced talking about taking a proposition in San Antonio; said McMullen didn't look so good for a new theater, and so forth. He commenced to hint about taking up the checks. For several days he's been hounding me more and more—until last night. You remember when he called me outside? Well, he put up this proposition.

"He showed me a letter from a lawyer named Gordon in San Antone, saying that his—Peterson's—option would be up tomorrow on the Empire Theater there and that the owners of it had got wise to the fact that a big corporation was after it and would probably pay a much bigger price

than Peterson would, and that the owners wouldn't renew the option for love nor money except at a price fifty per cent bigger. Peterson said he had heard about the corporation—some vaudeville circuit, I think—being after it and had got the option as a speculation. He didn't expect they'd move so quick, he said.

"Any way, he said he had the money to close the deal coming to McMullen, and that it would arrive on the late mail tonight or the first one tomorrow. He had to wait for it, he said. And of course he couldn't get to San Antonio by train quick enough to close. He said it meant a lot of money, and that if I would fly down to that stubblefield of Granger's tomorrow morning, get him, and fly him to San Antonio he'd see that every check I'd given would be torn up. Said he knew I'd be breaking all regulations about flying civilians and taking a chance with my commission, and that it would be well worth the thirteen hundred.

"I told him I would, got permission from the captain to make the flight by myself—and now this damn ankle comes along!"

AS MILLER finished his story Sleepy's eyes were glowing softly. Bit by bit the various parts of the scheme which he had vaguely surmised were falling into place.

He smoked slowly for a moment after Miller relapsed into silence.

"I see, Pete. You sure got yourself into a jam, didn't you? Well, now for my news. Last night I found out that you'd been losing to crooked players."

"What? Impossible, Sleepy! Why——"

"Why me no whys, and what me no whats, young man. You just listen."

Pete listened, listened as though life itself depended on the words of the man lounging in the chair.

"That's the dope, and that's the remedy. So you just lie there and nurse your busted ankle and leave things to papa," he concluded.

He cut off the flow of thankful words which emanated from the transfigured Miller by the simple process of leaving.

PETERSON and his aides had picked their victim well, he reflected as he ambled toward headquarters. He had knocked around the world a bit, to use his own phrase, and it was easy for him to understand how Miller had fallen trustingly into their trap. The Air Service gathered into its peculiar personnel widely differing types, from the soldier of fortune to eager, spirited youngsters like Miller. The boy was a flying veteran worthy of the border patrol, but like putty in the hands of men like Peterson.

"A few things like this'll make him cut his eye teeth, though," was his tolerant conclusion.

As he turned the corner in search of Captain Kennard a big motor car rolled swiftly down the road and drew up in front of the building. Mayor Edwards and Sheriff Trowbridge occupied the front seat, and Marjorie and portly Mrs. Edwards the rear.

"Was Pete hurt?" roared Trowbridge.

"Just a sprained ankle!"

Marjorie, who was already out of the car, gave a little gasp of relief. She had already glimpsed something of the horrible moments which would inevitably come to her if her life were cast with the Air Service. She turned away for a moment and daubed at her eyes.

"We couldn't get nothin' definite in town," said Edwards. "How'd it happen?"

Sleepy told them, in his narrative stressing Pete's wonderful flying, then added, "Sheriff, I'd like to have a moment of conversation with you and the mayor and captain just as soon as I whisper a couple of words in Marjorie's ear," drawled Sleepy. "Come here, fair maiden."

They sat on the veranda steps, just out of earshot of the others.

"I found out what's ailing Pete," he told her. "It was worth worrying about, all right, but he came out on top. Run down

and see him, and you won't find anything on his mind but you and his ankle."

Marjorie at times showed more sense than any woman had a right to have, Sleepy thought with relieved admiration, for she asked no questions.

"Thanks, Sleepy," she said softly.

"Now you and Mrs. Edwards run down there—he's in tent nine on the right hand side."

Two other flyers escorted the honored guests to Miller's tent while Trowbridge, Kennard and the mayor foregathered with Sleepy in the captain's office. He told the tale in full to his three understanding listeners, outlined his suspicions, and suggested a course of action.

"I figure that'll get 'em with the goods!" he concluded.

There were numberless questions and considerable discussion, but in the end Sleepy's plan was O. K.'d unanimously and in detail. They heard Marjorie's happy laugh outside, and Trowbridge lifted his huge bulk from the biggest chair in the office. His mouth twitched as he watched Sleepy drift out the door in response to Marjorie's call for him.

"Sleepy's done woke up again," he stated.

His eyes twinkled boyishly as his glance shifted from the Honorable Samuel to the captain.

"Looks that way," chuckled the mayor, and the stocky C. O. laughed aloud.

"This might be big, at that," he remarked. "Sheriff, I suppose you've already figured some way to worm a ride out of me on this case."

Trowbridge's mighty laugh reverberated from the walls and ceiling at the captain's grinning comment. The grizzled old-timer's fondness for flying was a standing joke. Ever since the first time he had used a ship on official business he had been a devotee of the air, and missed no opportunity to get a ride provided he had the slightest legal excuse.

"I ain't yet, but I prob'ly will. And say, I'd like to be to that game tonight almost as much as up in one o' yore contraptions."

SLEEPY himself was far from disgusted with the outlook. It was a few minutes before eight when he went into the hotel and called up Peterson's room.

"Sure—come right up," came the hearty voice over the wire.

Simpson and Gray were already there, and greeted the flyer cordially. Peterson had a drink ready for him, and was all smiles.

"Where's Miller?" he asked.

"Haven't you heard about his wreck?"

"Wreck? No! What happened?"

The man's face lost its smile, and his words were staccato. Gray and Simpson listened tensely.

Spears told them of the happening of the morning, and then went on diffidently, "Could I see you a minute privately, Mr. Peterson?"

"Huh? Oh, sure," replied Peterson viciously.

The man was chewing his cigar, his face sullen and his eyes hard. The others looked unaccountably downcast, likewise.

Sleepy followed Peterson into the hall. His heavy lids were raised briefly to meet the gaze of the bigger man.

"Pete and I are pretty good friends, Mr. Peterson, and he told me all about the arrangements between you. He was damn worried of course—both the money he owes you and the fact that you'd lose a lot by not getting to San Antonio. So, if it's O. K. with you, I'll take Pete's place and fly you up there tomorrow."

Peterson's florid face broke into a wide smile.

"Fine, Lieutenant, fine! I was worried, I'll tell you! That's great! You know all arrangements?"

"Granger's pasture, eight o'clock," nodded Sleepy gently. "I'll land you at Stilson field, and then fly on over to Donovan by myself. How much baggage have you?"

"Miller said he could carry two big suitcases all right."

"Easy. Wire 'em on the wings. Got a man to drive you out there who won't talk? It's a big risk for us to take, you know."

"Gray. He's all right. Good boy. Some flyer I'll make! Ho ho ho!"

Peterson's raucous laugh ushered them back into the room again. Gray and Simpson, whose heads were close together, looked up quickly. Their faces showed sudden relief as Peterson bustled around getting out chips and cards, talking steadily and laughing frequently.

He suggested stripping the deck of twos and threes, inasmuch as there were only four players. This violated all Sleepy's poker-playing instincts, but the faster the game the more to his advantage it would be, so he held his peace.

He was relieved to find that the gang had not dispensed with their signals because Pete was not there. The flyer lolled back in a deep rocker, playing with his accustomed drowsy deliberation.

THE third hand gave him his first opportunity. He had first chance to open. He noted that Simpson was signaling openers, and that the other two had nothing. Sleepy opened for three dollars. Gray threw in his hand, and Simpson stayed. Peterson, who had signaled nothing in his hand, raised it five dollars. Sleepy stayed on his pair of aces, and then Simpson re-raised fifteen dollars.

"The usual freezeout for my little eight dollars," Sleepy told himself delightedly.

As he fully expected, Peterson stayed, probably figuring it unnecessary to raise again to force out the opener.

"Well, you boys are getting so gay I'll quit laying low myself. Up thirty-five more!" stated Sleepy.

It was absurdly simple. He knew Simpson had merely openers, and Peterson nothing. Both threw down, believing that their proposed victim had a very good hand.

Sleepy won an average of one hand out of three for the rest of the evening. When a good hand was signaled, he never played. Knowing almost exactly what every man held, he played hands without a single pair in them to freeze out the others with merely openers. The only hands which he played and lost were due to the luck of the draw, and the fickle lady gave him at least an even break.

He played with apparent carelessness that seemed almost lack of interest. He rarely opened—if none of the others had openers he didn't bother to open himself—and if they did he would pass no matter what he had. Consequently he was forced to show but very few hands, and there was no way for the three to know that one pair won most of the pots which they made big by their attempts to force him out.

At twelve o'clock he was six hundred and forty-five dollars to the good. Peterson had lost nearly four hundred of it, and the remainder was divided between Simpson and Gray.

"They're paying with pretty good grace—especially considering that one of them is supposed to be a garage employee," thought Sleepy, as all three counted out the money to him in cash. "What they expect to put over tomorrow would make six hundred look like the change of a nickel."

They appeared rather stunned at the result of the game, even so.

"You had marvelous luck," Peterson remarked, shoving the heap of crisp bills over to him.

"One of the best runs I ever had, except the time I got eight straight naturals with the money riding right through," yawned Spears. "Well, I must be galloping to the field. Everything is all set, I guess," he added meaningly.

"Sure thing," returned Peterson, slapping the airman's broad back.

He walked to the door with him, leaving Gray and Simpson picking up the débris of the game.

"Just to relieve Pete's mind, would you mind bringing along those checks of his so that I can mail 'em to him from San Antone?" Sleepy asked as he opened the door. "I may stay up there a few days."

"Absolutely, Lieutenant, absolutely. I'm a man of my word, and I'll be more tickled than he is when I hand 'em over to yuh in San Antone. 'Night!"

Sleepy was fingering the plethoric roll of bills in his pocket as he walked through the deserted lobby.

"Three-twenty for Pete and three-twenty for me," he was thinking. "My share'll make a good wedding present for 'em. The quicker Pete's under new management the better for the good of his bank account and the salvation of his soul."

WHICH was not as generous a gift as one might suppose. Sleepy had the gambler's lack of understanding of the value of money, and so long as he was having a good time a few hundred more or less meant absolutely nothing to him.

While the big car was hurtling over the road to the field, and later as he made leisurely progress toward getting to bed, the remarkably active brain behind his remarkably stoical and guileless countenance was going over and over his plans in search of a possible flaw. Ever since his discovery that the three strangers had been trying to get Miller in financial straits he had been certain that they wanted to use him for some ulterior purpose. If money was their object, Miller was a very poor prospect. To his mind, the ulterior purpose was revealed in the proposed trip by air to San Antonio.

The reason they had given, while plausible on the surface, did not hold water in the light of their persistent campaign to get Miller in their debt. The only possible explanation of their long efforts was that they wanted to get either themselves, or something they carried, into San Antonio with secrecy. In the light of all the recent furor over the drug traffic along the border, the possible explanation for their activities had leaped into his mind in an instant.

What could be more likely than that those heavy suitcases would contain smuggled drugs? The flare-up in San Antonio a month before had made ordinary channels suicidal. Every agency of the law was working overtime to stop the flood of drugs which had been coming over the Rio Grande into San Antonio, and thence distributed all over the country. If his suspicions were near the mark, Peterson and the others had succeeded in getting the drugs across the river, only to be halted by the news that all routes north were closed. Arriving by airplane meant almost certain safety.

Assured in his own mind, and made still more certain by the instant concurrence of Captain Kennard, the sheriff and Mayor Edwards, he had planned with the idea of capturing Peterson, at least, with the drugs and with the least trouble possible.

He would land in the Granger pasture, get the baggage wired to the plane, and take off. Ten miles north there was another field which was suitable for landing. By tinkering with the motor he would cause it to miss, make a supposed forced landing—and there would be the sheriff and a deputy to have their guns trained on Peterson before he could move from his seat. Simpson was shadowed right now, and could be arrested at any moment. A car would be less than a mile away from the Granger pasture tomorrow morning, and Gray and anyone else who had been Peterson's companion on the trip would be arrested on their way back. Thus would trouble and bloodshed be saved. There was no doubt that they would fight desperately, being so near Mexico, to save their valuable cargo and their own skins. They would not hesitate to kill any number of men, for chances of escape would be excel-

lent. The only safe way was to give them no opportunity to fight, and still to get them with the drugs actually in their possession. It would undoubtedly be useless to arrest them now, for there was no telling where the contraband was hidden. And an arrest before taking off would be risky —there might be any number of confederates hidden about the field, watchful for any double-dealing.

And then again, the whole structure might have been builded on the sand. However, that possibility was not worrying Sleepy to any extent. He sank into bed with a slow grin of pleasure at the prospect of the morrow.

THE morning was bright and clear, to his great relief. At breakfast, which he consumed with excellent appetite, the young men who passed in and out for the morning nutriment gave him much free advice and discussed the amounts they could afford to contribute for flowers when a persecuted theater man took revenge for having his baggage rifled.

After Sleepy had turned for the takeoff in a few minutes, flying low, his De Haviland roared across the big pasture. Some mules scampered to one corner, leaving a free path for a landing. One of them, unsatisfied still with the status quo, jumped the fence and made off in the general direction of Mexico and points south.

Sleepy noted a small car standing alongside the fence. A narrow dirt road, branching off from the San Elizabeth highway, led past the field. The pilot made sure that his Colt in his waist band was ready to his hand, and unobservable to the casual eye, and then turned for his landing.

The plane dropped across the fence and hit the ground in a stall, landing only a few feet from the barrier. It dropped fully five feet vertically, which caused it to bounce, but likewise saved distance.

He turned and taxied diagonally toward the fence. With a sudden roar as he turned on the motor and held left rudder the ship swept around until it was in a position for the takeoff. Peterson and Gray, carrying two very large suitcases and a handbag, climbed over the fence and reached the idling plane as Sleepy jumped out and leaned restfully against a wing as he lighted a cigarette.

"Everybody on time!" laughed Peterson. "Where do these go?"

"I'll fix 'em. 'Morning, Gray."

They watched interestedly as he lifted one suitcase on each wing and rammed it close against the fuselage. With thin, strong safety wire and a pair of pliers he wired them securely, using the wing-hinges as a base. His movements were slow, but there was no lost motion.

The two landsmen were constantly sweeping the smiling country nearby as though for possible interlopers. A man who was plowing in a field a quarter-mile away had stopped and was watching. There was the drone of an automobile from the San Elizabeth road, a few hundred yards north, but it did not stop and the car passed on. Sleepy wondered where the sheriff's deputies were waiting for Gray and the garage flivver.

"That'll fix 'em," he drawled finally, straightening with a tired sigh. "You'll have to carry the handbag in your lap. Those suitcases are heavy as hell."

"Got a folding typewriter and a lot o' other junk in 'em," laughed Peterson, who was plainly much excited. Sweat was standing out on his face, and his pudgy hands were trembling.

Sleepy fished a suit of heavy flying overalls from the back seat. He held them out for Peterson to step into.

"Keep you warm, and your clothes from getting sprayed with oil," he said.

After a moment of hesitation, his prospective passenger stepped into them and the pilot got his arms into the armholes. Spears immediately started to button it, being very solicitous that it should fit the neck closely and be tight around ankles and wrists.

Then under the pretense of getting the

belt fixed, he swiftly felt of Peterson's pockets. There was a pistol, as he expected.

"He'll have a sweet time getting to that!" the flyer told himself with a barely perceptible smile. "There must be seventy thousand dollars worth of drugs in that baggage, if any, so we'll make a good job of it."

Which he did. He buckled the belt and then knotted and reknotted it.

"Comes loose often—buckle no good," he told Peterson. "And it's a damn uncomfortable thing to have your clothes come loose in the air. In addition, I can't take any chance on loose edges catching any of the controls. These ships can be run from either the front or rear seats, you know. I don't need one—used to it."

THE big man's usual loquacity had completely left him, but he climbed in the back seat without hesitation. Sleepy strapped him in, and then lifted the handbag, which was also very heavy, into his lap.

"Keep your feet flat on the floor and don't touch anything or you'll probably crack us up. Now we'll put on your helmet and start."

This finished, he climbed in the front seat and strapped himself. He turned to grin fleetingly into the set face behind him.

"All set?"

Peterson nodded. Sleepy waved to Gray, and shot the throttle forward and backward twice to clean out the motor. In a few seconds they were flashing across the grounds as the propeller bit into the air at full speed.

"So much for so much," grinned Sleepy as he lifted his ship over the fence and then went into a slight climbing turn. "In a couple of minutes we'll come to the real dirty work."

It was to be dirtier than he thought. Scarcely had he completed his circle of the field and assured himself that the readings on voltmeter, tachometer and pressure gauges were as they should be than there came a sputter in the motor. The pilot tensed instantly, then relaxed again as the motor caught.

He swiftly scanned the earth unfolding below him. Tiny, irrigated fields were not comforting. However, in less than five minutes they would be over the field where the sheriff awaited him.

Then, with a suddenness that was like a physical shock, the all-pervading roar of the four hundred horsepower motor gave way to profound silence. For a moment the whining of the wires was inaudible to ears accustomed to that constant drum of sound. Spears nosed over automatically, to keep flying speed. The motor had quit.

They were only three hundred feet high. There was nothing for it but straight ahead, and nothing straight ahead but a crack-up. The question was, how bad a wreck. Irrigation ditches crisscrossed every few yards through cultivated land green with growing crops.

One of those ditches would turn the plane on its back like a flash. So Sleepy made one of those lightning decisions which are forced on flyers so often. He cut the switches as they sped earthward at eighty miles an hour, thus reducing fire hazard to a minimum. He slipped and skidded until satisfied that the plane would cross a ditch ahead just before it lost flying speed.

His judgment was accurate. Seven feet high and dropping fast the De Haviland shot across the ditch. As it dropped beneath him Sleepy gave it full rudder, and it hit the soft ground in a sideward mush that splintered the landing gear and telescoped the lower right wing. His head got a nasty bump that left him almost too dizzy to climb out for a moment, but he got himself in hand and swiftly snapped open his belt.

AS HE leaped to the ground he saw what had hitherto escaped him. A broken strut had ripped a hole in the right hand suitcase, aided by the complete wreck

of the wing. Telltale tins and wrapped packages were scattered over the débris of the wing and the splintered undercarriage.

"Throw up your hands!" came Peterson's harsh voice behind him. He had seen the damage before Spears had, and had ripped open the flying suit by sheer force.

Without a conscious reasoning Spears made a plan and followed it instantaneously. He could feel a generous rush of blood on the side of his head, which would lend weight to his subterfuge. As he hit the ground he half-turned, threw his arms out as though in utter weakness and dropped to the ground. As he fell, his back to the ship, he had his arm under him, hand on the butt of the gun.

Peterson was cursing the ship, his hard luck, the pilot, the earth and all who dwelt therein. The flyer grinned as he heard the outburst of red-hot verbiage. He heard Peterson jump from the plane beside him.

"Huh! Fainted!" Peterson said aloud.

Sleepy lay motionless, holding his breath, as the man bent over him. Then he took his gamble with death. Most people would not have believed a human being, least of all Sleepy Spears, could move so fast. He turned like a flash of light. One hand darted for Peterson's now carelessly-held gun. His right hand appeared as quickly with his own cocked Colt.

Peterson's shot drilled into the ground not a foot from Spears' body before a grip like steel twisted his gun from him. The smuggler was no milksop, however. He was on the flyer like a flash, one hand on his throat, the other on the gun.

For a long moment of growing agony there was a struggle as deadly as it was quiet and without movement. With all the strength in him, straining until his body was bathed in icy perspiration, the pilot forced the gun toward his assailant's body, inch by inch. Bit by bit he felt himself being strangled, but his other hand was beneath Peterson's knee, and he could not move it.

He felt as though flesh and blood could stand no more. That racking strain—steady, pitiless——

And then the gun came suddenly forward to rest, muzzle-first, against Peterson's side. The smuggler's muscles were soft and flabby and had weakened under the strain.

Fighting to keep from losing consciousness, Spears dug viciously with the gun. The gasping Peterson took the hint quickly. His fingers loosened, and slowly he withdrew his hand.

"G-Get up!" croaked Sleepy.

Peterson obeyed, ever conscious of the menacing gun. Sleepy lay there for a moment until he had partially recovered from the effects of the throttling, and then, with one eye on his sullen captive, he walked over and got the gun he had thrown a few feet away.

"Well, I guess the jig's up," he drawled. "Sit down and wait for the sheriff. He'll have seen us land, and come after us hell bent for election. Oh, before you do that, give me those checks of Pete Miller's. I know how you got 'em—you three had a signal system like the Morse code. Move, damn you!"

The tone was soft, but somehow there was no question of just what Sleepy meant. The man had them with him, and fished them out obediently. Sleepy ran over them and stuck them in his pocket.

"Didn't get much of a ride for your money, did you?" he inquired. "Sit down and act pretty and I'll furnish you a cheroot."

Five minutes later the sheriff and two deputies found two silent men smoking as they lay on the grass, the flyer with a gun and Peterson with a look of apoplectic rage.

"Motor quit without any tinkering at all!" Sleepy drawled in answer to the puffing sheriff's rush of inquiries. "That busted suitcase and his pulling a gun gave the game away right at the jump. No—nothing hurt but the ship and Peterson's professional pride."

High stakes in the game of the ownership of a cattle kingdom.

HIGH MESA

By JACKSON GREGORY

Author of "The Timber Wolf," "Salvation Island," etc.

Conclusion

CHAPTER XVI

ON OUR WAY

ARRIVED at Elmer's abandoned car, Jerry first of all removed his horse's bridle, hung it over the saddle horn and gave the animal a hearty thwack across the rump to start it on its homeward way to High Mesa. Next he emptied his five-gallon can of gasoline into the tank. This done, deciding that if Red Handsome was not already riddled with bullets he was

safe enough for the moment, he switched on his headlights and stood before them to read his father's letter.

A glance at it, however, decided him that a careful perusal would have to await a time of greater leisure; there were several sheets, written on both sides and the well known script was, as always, none too readily decipherable. As it was he skimmed the contents hurriedly, and when he had done his jaw was set and his eyes stern and bright with an unalterable purpose. There was much here about a woman calling herself the Empress, much about a man named Frank Smith, generally known as El Bravo. . . . There had been strife between High Mesa and the Empire Ranch. . . . Sommers had had his eyes opened to the high-handed lawlessness . . . there had been a clash . . . if he lived he meant to make her pay in full for an atrocity which cried to Heaven . . . there was a fish-eyed reptilian, the killer, El Bravo . . . Sommers addressed his son in this way, leaving the letter in the Sure Enough Money place, since he had not heard from him for three years . . . "If they do get me, my boy, you'll know who . . ."

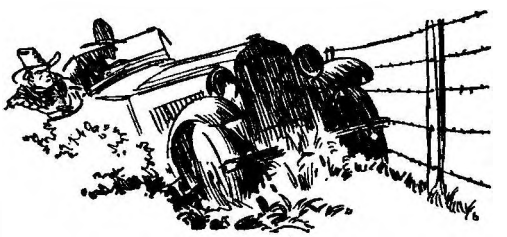
"Good old dad," groaned Jerry. He folded the letter with an almost tender care. "And I wasn't here when the time came—just as I wasn't with Bob. Why am I always running off from the place where later I'll wish I had stayed! Right now—chasing off like a long-eared jackass after a man who ought to be kicked into the pen! Well, he's properly a jailbird, but at that I don't know that he's earned the capital punishment. Further, it's partly my responsibility that they got him. And finally, if Beryl wants the pup —or wants anything else that I can go get for her——"

He jumped into the car, trod angrily on the starter, was recalled to small common-place matters by the realization that a dry carburetor was not conducive to a swift start, jumped down and found a cupful of gasoline in his discarded tin, remedied matters and was on his way.

HE WAS half way to Nacional before it dawned on him that border regulations would stop him from passing into Mexico; the international gates would have been closed long ago. But there were no gates against the passage of the car from the Empire Ranch. That simply meant that he would have to keep an eye open for a road forking off, one which swerved toward the Fernandez ranch and which would lead straight to the ranch headquarters without coming under the eye of two governments. Along some such roadway, most certainly, had El Bravo traveled; that way had he driven off the infected stock from Alamo Springs. Nothing was clearer than that that snake-eye was about business which asked no investigation from any authorities.

Forced to drive more slowly lest he miss the way, watchful for any faint track which turned aside, Jerry came presently to a well defined roadway branching off in the direction he wanted to travel. He turned into it unquestioningly and picked up all the speed he dared. Here was a desert road upon which, he knew right well, too much haste might carry him into deep, loose sand which would act as a trap to spinning wheels.

"I've got to get me another plane," he muttered in disgust as he fought with a jerking steering wheel and narrowly avoiding running straight on where his road



turned. "Roads like this were made to look down on from the sky."

He angled through a thicket of tall harsh mesquite, went down into a dry, gravelly

sink, fought a difficult way up on the other side and came abruptly to a barbed wire fence. He jammed on his brakes just in time to save the front tires and jumped down. The gate was fastened with a chain and a padlock. He ran back to his car; there were sure to be in the tool kit some sort of tool that would cut wire.

"Quien es?" said a sharp, sudden voice. "What do you want?"

Startled, Jerry whirled and stared.

"Doggone your picture," he grunted for answer. "Do you know you could be fined for scaring a man out of his skin? Where'd *you* come from?"

The fellow was muffled in a cloak, his face hidden under a broad, high-peaked sombrero. He stood leaning languidly against one of the sturdy posts of the gateway, both hands hidden under his cloak; near the butts of his pistols, Jerry supposed.

A soft crunching in the sandy soil told where another man approached from the right. The steps stopped abruptly; other steps drew nearer.

THE fellow whose voice had startled Jerry spoke again. He was sorry, but at this time of night there was no passing. The señor would have to come again during the daytime; between the hours of six and six. These were orders. Between those hours, provided he had business."

"Look here," said Jerry, "you're not government men, are you?"

"Private patrol, señor. For the Empire Rancho."

Jerry began explaining. He did have business with the Señora Fernandez and it was important. The gatekeeper shook his head. He was sorry, after a peculiarly light-hearted fashion, but there was no passing. Jerry waxed eloquent, became heated as he felt himself about to be baffled. The thing was not only urgent, it was a necessity. The Empress would thank no man for standing in the way of one who brought such word as Jerry carried! Here was an affair which——

"It has to do with something you may already have heard about," he said shrewdly. "Or were you told anything? When Charlie Fernandez came this way just now, carrying a prisoner——"

There was a brief conference in undertones between two of the men who were mere vague shadows to him. One of them barked out an order to open the gate; then he got into the car and sat upright and rigid, his hands hidden under his cloak. Jerry was to go ahead, and this man was to go with him. And no stretch of the imagination was required to tell him that only a few inches from his side was the business end of a gun or the keen point of a knife. He jumped to his seat and shot through the gate as it was jerked open.

"The getting in was all right; how about getting out again?" he wondered.

It was only about three miles farther, his companion informed him, to the ranch-house. A white road snaked among dusty willows; there was a thumping wooden bridge under the wheels; more white road, hard-packed now on which a man could drive faster. Sudden lights shone out, dull yellow spots where grimy windows like jaundiced eyes peered out from Empire Village. Brighter lights gleamed above them, were blotted out by the big cottonwood grove, shone out clearly once more, and Jerry's car came to a stop before the high white walls, just in front of one of the iron gates.

The man seated beside him did not stir but called sharply. A figure, cloaked like the others, detached itself from the black gate and stepped forward. In a few words he was told that a visitor by way of the First North Gate claimed urgent business with Señora Fernandez—something connected with something that had happened tonight.

"Tell her it's Jerry Boyne," added Jerry.

He started to get down but the man at his side said curtly, "It is best to wait, señor. It will be a minute only."

SO JERRY made himself a cigarette, pondered on the high hand of lawlessness, and waited. Light steps went hastening up to the house. They ceased suddenly and there fell a short silence; light steps, even quicker now, came running back.

"Señora Fernandez is glad that Señor Boyne has come," said a voice and the way was open.

Jerry got down then; he could have driven on up to the house but he felt that having his car ready outside the gates was rather like having an ace in the hole. For it struck him as entirely possible that he might want to leave this place in a hurry. He went ahead briskly, bending his mind toward shaping the forthcoming interview; two men fell in close behind him and the three passed under garden trees, among darkly glistening shrubs and to the massive front door. It stood wide open upon a red-carpeted hallway, softly lighted.

"Good boy, Jerry!" criew a well remembered voice. And here, shoving heavy curtains aside from a deep, arched door, came the Empress to meet him. What a woman she was! At the moment she scarce looked half of her fifty years. Vivid always, she was on the crest of some wave just now and came close to being radiant. Evidently she had only a little while ago returned from some expedition on horseback; a pair of silver-chased spurs still winked on the heels of her high, yellow boots; there was a big silver buckle at the belt of her modish riding breeches; there was the inevitable flash of crimson in the lining of her cape. Never had the woman looked more vain or arrogant; never so sure of her own glittering destiny.

"Good boy, Jerry!" she said the second time, grasping his hand warmly, and led the way back through the curtains and into a big comfortable room with shaded lights and low cushioned leather chairs. "So, El Bravo tells me, you've decided to throw in with old Lady Fernandez, eh? And, being a man of action, here you are saying, 'Let's get going!' "

With his plans laid, Jerry struck boldly, so boldly in fact that the woman stared at him, first in wonder, then in a sharp suspicion which banished her smile of greeting and drew her brows down.

"So that fool, El Bravo, is back, is he?" was the way he began. "Has the man gone crazy? Did he tell you he came close to slaughtering a man we want very much to keep alive? Did the ass tell you that I had to jump in and risk a life that I think a lot of, chipping in with that same man when that hot-head El Bravo raided him? You say I've decided to throw in with you—and I say that that depends!"

"What's all this?" she snapped him up. "Listen to the man rave! You had to chip in, you say? To save somebody's bacon? And you come here blazing out at me. What's wrong with your face? Where's your hat? What the devil have you been up to anyhow?"

"And that precious son of yours!" Once committed to his line, he felt that his only hope lay in making it convincingly thorough-going. "What did he butt in for? What has he done with this jasper who calls himself Gerald Sommers——"

"What do you mean?" she rasped out at him, suspicion livelier than ever. "Calls himself Gerald Sommers, you say? What are you driving at?"

He looked at her with level eyes which told no tales.

"Wasn't it understood—or didn't I get El Bravo right—that I am the one and only real genuine Gerald Sommers?"

She laughed and looked relieved. But again her face hardened.

"When I invited you to play," she said hotly, "I don't know that I asked you to run the whole show! If you've got any notion that you are indispensable, why then suppose you get to hell out of here!"

"I'll go fast enough and gladly enough," he retorted swiftly, "if the show is going to start with killing any geese that lay golden eggs! What did your son do with Red Handsome?"

She moved to a chair and sat down. On a table near by were cigarettes; she

lighted one, blew a puff of smoke ceilingward and then looked at him quite calmly and very shrewdly.

"Let's get what you are driving at," she invited. "Shoot what's on your mind."

"Fair enough. To begin with, that was a crazy play to shoot Red Handsome's place up. He might have blinked out——"

"Admitted," she snapped. "There was a bit too much enthusiasm, and—well," and she flashed him a sidelong glance of devilish wickedness, "boys will be boys, you know. A youngster got a little too much pepped up and there you are." She shrugged. "As for a certain red-head who used to call himself Gerald Sommers and whom we'll name Red Handsome, if you like that better, he's alive and doing well, I hear."

"Let's hope so! On the hoof that bird is worth a good two hundred and fifty thousand! There's the Alamo, there's a good hundred thousand in securities——"

"You've found out a thing or two, haven't you?" she leered at him. It may have been approvingly; Jerry hoped so.

"You'd be surprised," he told her coolly, sat down and helped himself to a cigarette.

She surprised him by beginning to laugh, gleefully this time.

"And I asked about your face! Charlie told me; Red pretty near spoiled it for you, didn't he? Well, at that, you marked him so you'll know him next time."

"Never mind that. There are times to overlook the personal equations. This is a big thing——"

"Big, your foot!" she sneered. "Man, you don't know what big things are. But the road's wide open for you to look in and learn. If you play the game with me and play it square from start to finish, I'll put you so damned high that you can reach up and scoop down stars to wear in your necktie. You'd say the Empire Ranch was a big thing, wouldn't you? Well, I guess it is; but it's nothing to what it's going to be. No the wind isn't just blowing; I feel like talking and you're lucky. Spread your ears and let something soak into your brain. Oh, you've got one all right, and I know it or I wouldn't be taking you by the hand.

"Big, you say, this little deal of hogging High Mesa? Listen, kid; the Empire Ranch is spreading, spreading in all directions and all the time. It's like a kingdom now; you know it and you know who's the king over it. You once said something about the high and the low here; that's little Louise. In time I'm going to have High Mesa and Little Mesa and Alamo Springs—and all the land between them and the Empire! Already I've got options on a hundred thousand acres—and if you want to know who's naming the price and making it stick, why it's me. Big things! They're on the way.

"Now wait a minute! I'm telling you things. I've got money and I've got power and I've got a way of getting what I'm after. There are big men in Mexico who are afraid to move without asking me. Before you are a hundred years old I'll show you how a woman can pick a man and make him president! I've already named one governor and I've busted another—and I've had money from both! Laugh that off! The law?" she sneered. "Why, men are fools and nations are run by men! Fools and petty crooks. And here am I, spreading along the border, spreading north and south. Who'll say what goes back and forth across that same border, when I've got a big hunk of it in the heart of my ranch?—Why do they call me the Empress? By God, because that's what I am!"

Not even there did she stop. Jerry,

fascinated, striving for the poker face which the situation demanded, sat silent and listened. He came to see as he had never understood before, the true meaning or inordinate ambition; the stuff was in her soul and she was sure of herself. A bit mad on top of it? No madder than anyone who has surrendered utterly to the single, driving idea. He glimpsed dark pathways which she meant to tread yet did not fully point out to him; he saw her defying or bribing or tricking the officials of two nations, trafficking across the border in any illicit venture—provided it was magnificently profitable! Even now she was about to found a new town; and it was to be a wide open, devil-of-a-place, such as silly Americans flocked to pay high prices for liquor and to drop fortunes on gambling tables.

"This gambling racket," she said with a chuckle, "there's money in it, Jerry. And my little casino is getting famous. Drop in tomorrow night if you want to see some fun. A couple of high rollers have heard of me and are curious. 'Assure us there'll be plenty of money in sight,' they've written me, 'and we'll look you over.' Who are they? Well, one's old General Benito Valdez, and you know who he is and where he stole his millions? And the other's none other than Ellsworth W. Vetters, one of the biggest ship-owners on the Pacific Coast. Used to live in Spain; that's where he caught the gambling fever. Look in tomorrow night, young man; you'll see a big game rolling. And who'll get the coin?" She winked a shrewd blue eye and ended as she had begun, chuckling.

OF A sudden she jerked forward in her chair, her hands hardening on its arms, those keen blue eyes drilling at him and looking like polished blue jewels.

"Don't get me wrong, kid," she snapped warningly. "Don't set me down as a fool woman that talks too much and tells everything she knows! Don't jump at conclusions; you're apt to land up in a ditch. Go blab all I've told you; where'd it get you? Why, man, you might be anything you please, a border gum-shoe or a prohibition agent. I'm not trusting you with anything that could hurt me, and I'll not trust you until you're in as deep as I am! Once you've gone into court and sworn that you are Gerald Sommers—then it might be different. Right now if you tried to get funny, I'd name you a liar and simply kick you out of a chance of big money. *Sabe?*"

"You make it nice and clear. Now suppose I tell you something? Ready for a little shock? Here it is; this Red Handsome chap is going to be easy to oust for the simple reason that he's no more Gerald Sommers than I am! What do you say to that?"

Those blue jewels that were her eyes told him nothing.

"Bright boy," she said slowly. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean what I say." He paused a moment, hardening himself; he found it difficult to speak the name which he must speak without hurling it at her with a furious promise to do simple justice in the case of a splendid fellow who, at her orders, was dead. "Bob Kingsbury," he said sternly, "knew this Red Handsome of old, and knew that he was not Gerald Sommers."

"Interesting, if true," she said coolly. "Well, I'm listening!"

He shrugged. "Unfortunately Bob Kingsbury is no longer with us——"

"The fool!" she burst out venomously. "Two fools, those Kingsburys. And where are they now?"

Again he steeled himself and again he shrugged. There would come a time—well, that time was not now.

"I came," said Jerry, eyeing her steadily, "less to see you than to have a word with Mr. Red Handsome. Where is he? And am I to have that word?"

"You're damned cool!"

"Would I be here at all if I were not?" he demanded.

"What do you want to see Red for?" And here all her suspicion, ever a watch-dog over the perilous paths she walked, came leaping back.

"I want to assure him that no bodily harm will come to him as long as he does what he's told; I want to give him your assurance of that as well as mine. Otherwise he may go taking chances and—well, getting hurt. No, that's not all of it," as her suspicion seemed only to grow sharper. "Not even the best part of it. I want to warn him that when time comes to step out of the shoes he's now wearing, he's to sign over all claim to certain securities and to the Alamo Ranch—and that he's to make sure I get my share! That's flat, my dear lady. Otherwise I don't play and you'll simply have to go get yourself another red-head who'll take what scraps you care to chuck to him and just take orders."

"Think you're hard-boiled, don't you?" she muttered.

He baffled her with his best grin.

"And," she added angrily, "you mean that you don't trust——?"

"Sh!" he laughed at her. "Is that a word for either of us to use? Shall the next Mr. Gerald Sommers trust the little Louise any more than the little Louise trusts the next Mr. Gerald Sommers?"

That amused her. But she grew grave and thoughtful. Jerry rose quickly, before she could have time to say anything further.

"I'm on my way——"

"You are if I say so!" She, too, sprang to her feet. "I could have you wiped out ——" she snapped her strong fingers—"like that!"

"Sure. Silly, though, wouldn't it be?"

A quick bright admiration leaped up into her eyes.

"Damn you, Jerry! If you play square with me—! El Bravo is an ass, after all. Charles is too young. Yes, I'll let you go and gab with my visitor." A shrewd smile touched her lips. "At that, I guess I've got ample evidence there's no great love between you two! It's carved all over your faces, both yours and his!

What a sweet black eye you'll be carrying around to remind you. When will I see you?"

"Not before tomorrow night," he said at random. "I've been known to look in when and where money was chinking."

HE DID not know when she had rung for a servant; he did not hear any far bell tinkling. But the curtains parted and a boy in her resplendent livery looked in.

"I want Ramiro," she said commandingly and the boy with a quick, frightened *"Si Señora!"* sped away with whispering feet.

Ramiro, one of her cloaked guards, hawk-faced, jade-eyed, a leathern-visaged Indian, came hurriedly. To him the Empress gave her commands crisply; this señor was to have five minutes, no more, with that other señor in the strong room. And Ramiro was to remember what had happened to a certain confrere of his who not so long ago had allowed a mad Kingsbury to come in uninvited through her gates! Ramiro's eyes narrowed; one might be very sure that he had not forgotten.

"Adios, Jerry," said the Empress carelessly. "Ride with me and pick stars. Go your own way, and get nowhere like the rest of the fool men. Or get funny, and drop to hell the shortest way."

"Adios, Empress," said Jerry, and followed Ramiro.

They went out at the front door, through the garden at the side of the house and to the rear. In a corner of the high white wall was a small sturdy square

building of solid masonry. It appeared to be windowless; there was a narrow door under which a dim light seeped. But all was pitch dark about it; an enormous oak spread its branches, thick with foliage, above the low roof and shut out the stars.

"Dim chance I've got," muttered Jerry to himself. "And by now, I'll bet a man, she's got half a dozen ragamuffins on the way to see what's doing——"

He made up his mind right then that there was nothing to do but go back and report to Beryl that her little playmate was safe enough for the present and that in a day or so he'd have him free. And at the very instant when sober reason convinced him of the utter impossibility of accomplishing anything, a reckless and quite mad impulse assailed him and he ceased marching with cold reason and committed himself irrevocably to the mad impulse.

There was a single guard leaning against the strong room. He should have the key. Jerry saw the glow of his cigarette. He'd be lounging, not particularly concerned with two men coming from the house—Ramiro, his hands under his cloak, was close at Jerry's side.

In the friendly dark Jerry drew his old forty-five Colt out of his pocket. When they were within three steps of the building, Jerry whipped this heavy weapon high above his head and brought it crashing down on Ramiro's skull. As the Indian fell Jerry leaped in upon the guard and drove the muzzle of the revolver hard into the fellow's middle.

"The key!" he whispered savagely into the fellow's ear. "One wiggle and I blow you all apart. Quick! *Quick!*"

Had he had time to plan, he would never have attempted so foolhardy a thing. First of all there was every chance that the man had no key!

But a key was already turning in a lock —the door was open. Red Handsome, starting up from a bench, was staring wonderingly. Jerry drove the guard inside and said hurriedly to the prisoner:

"On our way. We've got only a minute. Tie this fellow up with something and shut his mouth with a handful of rags."

Red Handsome's eyes in the candle light gleamed savagely.

"There's a quicker way," he grunted, and struck. With all his might he drove his fist into the guard's face, and the man dropped without a gurgle. "On our way? You're damn' right!"

THEY stepped out and closed the door after them. A moment they stood, listening. Not a step was to be heard anywhere. Jerry stooped for the unconscious Ramiro's cloak and hat, thrusting them into his companion's hands. Then walking swiftly and as silently as they could, they went through the garden and to the front gate.

"It will be easy," whispered Red Handsome. "The damn fool guard will never be looking for trouble coming from the inside."

"Keep your face hidden," commanded Jerry curtly. "There's to be no trouble. Walk along naturally now; let him hear us talking. He let me in at the Empress' orders and he'll let us out."

The gatekeeper turned carelessly. When Jerry said coolly, "Open up, *amigo*," the man answered, "*Si, señor*," and lifted the iron bar. The two stepped through; there it would seem went the recently arrived stranger accompanied by the same guard who had escorted him here. The gate clanged shut and Jerry slipped into the seat of his car; Red Handsome wasted no precious moment in climbing in beside him. Smoothly the car rolled out into the road, turning north.

"I wish I could have borrowed the old lady's biplane," began Jerry, "in case of ——"

From somewhere in the gardens behind them a sharp voice called out; another voice answered excitedly. There was a babble of sounds, a sudden silence—and

then the scream of a siren, as bloodcurdling as the howl of a wolf.

Jerry opened his throttle wide and sent the car leaping along the wavering white ribbon of road.

Chapter XVII

JERRY COMES HOME

"HERE'S where we take a beautiful chance of piling up in a ditch," said Jerry gathering speed recklessly. "At that we'd be no worse off than we'd be if those war-whoops behind closed in on us. Hold your hair on——"

"Look out, man! There's a curve—God! That was close!"

"Don't grab me, you fool!"

"Fool—I'll say I'm a fool! I ought to have stayed—I wish I was back there, behind bars—I'd have gone free all right; all the old hag wanted out of me was money."

"Shut up! Help me watch the road ahead."

They skidded around another bend and the headlights showed a straight strip of the narrow white road. Jerry took full advantage of it, jamming his accelerator down to the floor board. He had no eyes for the speedometer but knew from the whining wheels and from the rush of air that Elmer Blodgett's car had its good points.

Suddenly his companion began shouting at him.

"Half a mile ahead there's a road turns off to the left. Take that one. Slow down for it or you'll run by."

"Why?" snapped Jerry. "What's the matter with this road?"

"This is the one they'll be sure we've taken. Also, this leads to her main gate and there are always three or four guards handy to it; they've got a camp there. Swing left, I tell you; we'll have to do with one man only at the gate—if we ever get there!" he groaned as the front wheels got caught in a sand trap and for a breathless instant threatened to throw the car, swinging perilously, out into a tangle of mesquite.

"Right," retorted Jerry. "Watch for the road-fork. Left we go."

Behind them, softening with the distance, the siren screamed again. At no time is the voice of that diabolical contrivance exactly sweet music to the ear of the speeder; just now it cut through the night with such downright hellishness that it made little prickles along a man's spine. Jerry, with eyes glued to the road and hands glued to his steering wheel, began gradually to lessen the pressure of his boot on the throttle and when a sharp, "Ready!" was called in his ear he was ready. For a moment, even so, it was pitch-and-toss whether they would make it in safety; the turn was abrupt and the new road narrower than the one they abandoned. But here at the fork there were ruts into which the wheels slipped and which held them from a lateral wandering. Again Jerry stepped up the speed.

"Another mile and we are at the gate!" warned Red Handsome. "Slow down for it—better give me your gun."

"Slow down for nothing!" said Jerry grimly. "I'll bet the Empress never slows down for gates! Grab the horn and ride it; I'm busy. Hold it down. The gate will be open, all right—as long as we're asking to get out instead of to come in."

"But if it isn't!"

"Swallow your *ifs* and grab the horn! Here we go!"

RED HANDSOME cursed him for a fool, but made haste to obey orders. With a steady blare of the deep-toned horn the car fled with undiminishing speed, the steering wheel jerking dangerously in Jerry's tense grip as the spinning tires flung loose sand behind. A tiny light gleamed out straight ahead; there stood a Mexican with his inevitable cigarette. Jerry lifted his voice mightily to aid the command of the horn: "Open up, there!"

The glowing cigarette end leaped and vanished. Well, that meant swift action

of some sort. A white gate post flashed by, so close that only by an inch or so did the mud-guards miss it, and with the Empire Ranch behind, Jerry drew a first long deep breath.

But though he accounted the main hurdle negotiated he realized that he was still far from a satisfactory completion of the night's adventure. The road ahead of him was an evil thing, just a track through the sand, turning illogically, never too clearly defined, a road from which an unwary man at any instant might depart to find himself with uselessly churning wheels marking time in a sand drift. He was forced to go more slowly, though still at a clip which kept him tense; and he had no taste for any lessening speed, so positive was he that pursuit in full cry was already leaping along after him.

"How far on this sort of road?" he demanded. "Any chance of turning into a better one?"

"Three miles. There's a long slope there that comes down from Indian Gully; not much road but harder ground underfoot and not too deep sand. If you can keep from getting stalled in here—we ought to make it. Better slow down a bit."

All about them was what seemed in the starlight a limitless expanse of sand sparsely dotted with sage, a flat white-gray floor with the domed sky, white-star spangled, coming down to meet the level earth. Only straight ahead was the distant horizon broken by the hills that ran behind High Mesa and to east and west; between two remote rocky headlands a star burned like a lantern in a deep gorge. That way, still some miles ahead, lay Indian Gully.

THEY dropped down into a sudden barranca and were in luck not to come by a broken spring or some greater damage; they fought their way up and out on the farther side, Red Handsome leaping down and adding the urge of shoulder power. They crossed a wide sink wherein ghostly big moths fluttered white in the streaming headlights; leaving this behind they came to that long slope which gave hard ground underneath and a straight road slanting up toward the mouth of Indian Gully.

"There's a chance they didn't try to follow—or that they took the other road," conceded Red Handsome staring back. "What I was afraid of——"

"Sh!" commanded Jerry. "What's that?"

A single moment of intent ilstening told them the answer.

"And that's what I was afraid of," growled Red Handsome. "They're after us in the biplane, and any speed you make will be like a crippled horned toad trying to run away from a road-runner."

"Keep your eye peeled. How far off?"

Jerry snapped off his lights and as a result was forced to slacken speed; he dared go forward only at a crawl now. What a fine thing it would be, he thought longingly, if sage brush grew like oaks so that a man might drive his car under broad sheltering branches. Here about him was nothing that a man himself, let alone a car, might hide under.

"They're following the other road," said Red Handsome presently. As yet he had caught no glimpse of the plane itself, but judged from the sound of its racing motor. "Poke along while we can. They'll patrol that road for two or three miles, then cut across to this one. Damn it, man, can't you drive any faster than a mile a week?"

"Too bad this car hasn't a back seat for a man with your proclivities," Jerry informed him disgustedly. "Suppose you just watch out for the plane and leave the driving to me."

The rate at which they were traveling irked him no less than it did his companion, yet even at this crawl he found it hard to keep in the road. Nor did he even consider turning on his lights again; that would invite immediate discovery and though he hadn't figured out how the plane could very well interfere with their progress, yet he did pay the Empress the com-

pliment of fancying that she knew her way about, and was not simply skylarking for the fun of seeing where he was headed.

They inched on. The drone of the motor in the sky grew fainter with distance. The road straightened, marching obligingly in a direct line up the long slope. Jerry went into second gear—for five tormenting minutes he had been in low—and picked up speed. With luck, he thought that another five minutes would bring them to the mouth of Indian Gully and into a track amongst boulders and some few welcome cottonwoods.

Far off to the right, the way the big biplane had taken, he saw out of the corner of his eye what at the first instant was like a star gone mad and most thoroughly misbehaving, racing off among its fellows—a pale blue star playing comet tricks.

A rocket! A blue rocket for some sort of signal. It vanished in a spray of blue sparks. Almost immediately the purr of the distant motor picked up in distinctness and became a strengthening throb. Louder and clearer and more menacing it grew; like a great bat the plane itself began cutting across the stars.

"They'll be on us in a minute—give her the gun, man!"

"Shut up!" snapped Jerry.

For already he was giving her the gun. As a result he ran off the road, yet discovered with a spurt of gratification that there was a hard, solid surface only thinly overlaid with sand, and that his wheels gripped and carried on. Who wanted a road now? He steered straight for the rugged ground ahead and once again gave her the gun. His greatest care now was not to smash into a rock or go spilling down into a gulch. The best he could do was to aim for what looked like white open spots and trust that they were what they looked to be.

THE plane, coming on at terrific speed, was almost overhead. Surely, he thought, in so much dark the lookout above would fail to see the car running without lights. Just then, as though to tell him how futile such thin hope was, a second rocket went streaking across the sky, so near this time that he heard the hiss of its passage. This time, however, it was a blood-red rocket and it burst in a cascade of red fire. Another followed and still another as the plane swooped low, banked and curved and came rushing back.

He switched on his lights at that, set his teeth and gave his full attention to driving. It seemed to him then, knowing only what he knew, that another five minutes or less would see the game as good as won. Surely those signals were to bring men after him, yet equally clear was it that he had a good, safe lead.

The biplane, piloted with a skill which drew an involuntary flash of approval from him, came swooping back lower, still nearer and of a sudden there broke out, above the roar of the motor, a sound as of two mad riveters in a competition.

"Machine-gun!" he gasped, and snapped off his lights again.

"It's that hell-cat driving, and her little beast of a son at his favorite outdoor sport," cried Red Handsome. "Jam on your brakes. We're sunk hell-deep."

"Up-to-date, that old lady! Well, she said as much."

With a will then he did slam on his brakes. The plane had roared on and there was a dull boom that seemed to shake the world. Then, from a spot perhaps a hundred yards from them, the eartn vomited itself skyward in a great geyser of sand and rubble and rock.

"That's only a warning—the hell-cat would rather have us alive. Put on your lights for her to see——"

Already, almost at the first word, Red Handsome had jumped down and run to the front of the car. The thing to do, the only thing to do, so far as he could see, was to turn on the lights and then to stand in front of them, arms up in indication of surrender.

And to Jerry Boyne, sitting rigid, gnaw-

ing at his lip in blazing anger, the thing appeared to him in the same light. That bomb was without doubt a mere warning—look out for the next and the next! He tried to shrug and remind himself that it was better to lose a trick in the game than to be blown to pieces.

"It looks like— By the Lord, I've got it! Do you hear me, Red? Come back here—on the jump. Oh, what a hunch! Quick, you snail! Give me your belt. Oh, you ass! No, I haven't gone nuts. Quick, while they're wheeling and coming back. Don't ask questions." He caught at the belt which finally was held out to him and began getting his own off. All the while he was barking oht his orders, and all the while the plane, describing a wide arc, was cleaving its black path across the stars. "Now let some more air out of the rear tires; get them just flat enough to give them all the traction the law allows." He was working feverishly with his two belts now, getting them lashed to the steering wheel, seeking places to tie the free ends. He started his engine as from behind the car came the assurance that the tires were deflated as Jerry had ordered.

And now came Jerry's final amazing order. "Grab hold of a wheel and help me get the car turned around. She's going to head straight back down the slope toward Mexico!"

For the last time he switched on his lights. Señora Fernandez, if it were she at the controls as Red Handsome swore she was, and her son Prince Charlie at the machine-gun, must have accounted the game won, for they swept by again and merely relieved their feelings by dropping a second bomb at an entirely safe distance. Looking down all they could see was the car turning and pointing its lights back toward the south, and what further sign of surrender could that precious two ask?

"Now!" cried Jerry. "Let her flicker!"

He stopped his car, completed the lashings of the steering wheel and opened the door at his side. As he let in his clutch he opened the hand throttle all the way and jumped. Rolling over a couple of times he sat up and watched Elmer Blodgett's roadster go tearing away down the long slope, making its last run.

THE biplane rose sharply, circled and once more swept above the run-away car. Again there was the rattle of gun fire and as the plane perforce passed the slower earth-bound vehicle a third bomb fell and a cloud of debris was belched skyward. The plane zoomed on; the little roadster, with its steering wheel jerking savagely against two belt straps, carrying no weight but its own, fled on, swishing loose sand backward from its low-pressure tires. From where Jerry sat staring and where Red Handsome stood bemused, nothing of the car was to be seen save its frantically bobbing red tail light.

Down the long slope it gathered momentum; now and then it rushed through patches of sage brush; it encountered areas of deeper, looser sand, went skittering across them. If those straps only held and the wild thing didn't smash head on into a bank or turn turtle at a barranca why then the Empress and her charming son might chase it all the way to the border!

But doubtless the Empress was at the end of all patience, if patience she had ever known. The plane darted down after its scurrying prey again and again, and every time there was the staccato barking of the machine-gun and, time after time, an earth shaking thud as a bomb exploded.

Jerry leaped up.

"I wouldn't have missed this for a mint of gold pieces!" he cried. "Gosh, if we could only see the finish! She'll blow Elmer's buggy sky high—and then they'll gather round and look for the corpses!"

"Let's go," grunted Red Handsome.

"I've seen enough of the show, for one. We've got our chance now while the Fernandez family chase the car!"

"On our way, then, though I would like to hang around. Oh, well; a man can't have everything. Here's where we duck on into Indian Gully; we can make our way on up into the higher hills and then across to High Mesa. Let's go."

"Only I'm not on my way to High Mesa," Red Handsome told him as they hurried on, hunting the darker depressions all they could. "I'll cut across to Little Mesa, then on over to Alamo Springs."

"High Mesa, I said," Jerry told him coolly. "I went and got you according to orders; I'm going to deliver you the same way. We go to High Mesa, first stop. So don't let's waste time and breath arguing. I've got a gun on me and you haven't; I'd just as lieve blow a hole in your left hind leg as drink a glass of water with merry little pieces of ice sloshing around in it. Let's move. It's a long, long way to Tipperary yet and I'm right anxious to get a receipt for you."

"What are you driving at? Who sent you for me?"

Jerry ignored the question and the two hurried on. They came to the cleft of Indian Gully and felt safe from pursuit. Jerry politely waved his companion ahead, and used a forty-five for the waving; after that they went on in silence.

IT WAS a long, long walk, how many miles Jerry did not know, but plenty, he was sure. In due course, footsore from rough steady going, they made their way among the broken hills to a spot whence they saw a light. The light spelled High Mesa, and looked to be still further miles away. The light went out. Must be near midnight and time honest lights were out, meditated Jerry. They plodded on, and when they startled a herd of horses into full headlong flight Jerry shook his fist after them. Why didn't they come up and ask a man to have a ride? He became, at first vaguely, aware of a new freshness in the air; it was touched with an elusive fragrance and was crisp and sweet. Dawn, that's what it was! You could smell it coming down from the hills. A wee whisper of breeze was stirring; the stars were paling and there was a tremulous light along the horizon. So that was why the light winked out; not for midnight but for a new day. And at High Mesa someone had sat up all night—waiting.

It was full bright dawn with the sun making the skies glorious for his coming when the two men, plodding like automatons climbed up the last stretch of road to the mesa and entered in at the broad gate of the softly glimmering white adobe wall. They heard the plashing of the fountain and the gay bickering of the little garden-creek, and were tempted to turn aside here for a drink instead of waiting for one in the house.

In the garden standing beside what was to be a great heap of cut flowers were Beryl, old Uncle Doctor and the fat Maria. As the two dusty newcomers bore down upon them the old man saw them first and emitted something like a yelp of joy. Maria, turning swiftly at a considerable risk to her balance, stared at them and murmured, *"Mama mia!"* Beryl dropped a pair of shears and came running forward, both hands out.

"Oh, I am so thankful!" she cried impulsively. "And I do want to ask forgiveness—from my old playmate—Gerald Sommers!"

RED HANDSOME did not quite know what it was all about, but stepped quickly forward. Somehow she slipped by him when it seemed almost that she was going straight into his arms, and in another instant Jerry found himself in possession of those two quick impulsive hands, and saw her face lifted up to his and even saw how big and wonderful and altogether starry her eyes were.

"You're a dear, adorable old humbug," were the amazing words she was saying, and such tricks does the very early morn-

ing light play that he could have sworn that her eyes were very, very gay and that the tears were shining in them. "You're exactly what my grandfather says of you —an incurable romantic! And I am so ashamed——"

"What's all this?" cried Red Handsome, all at sea.

"Mr. Red Handsome," said Beryl, whirling on him, "I want you to meet my old childhood playmate, Mr. Gerald Sommers, sometimes known as Jerry Boyne —a sort of burglar!"

Jerry glared at Uncle Doctor but saw on his face only a look of mystification equal to his own.

"I never let out a cheep," muttered the old fellow. "Don't look at me like that."

"I don't understand," said Jerry. Then he looked to where Red Handsome stood, his face drawn savagely, strangely stamped with anger and chagrin and, perhaps, an abiding sorrow. "All I know is that I promised Beryl to go get this man for her —here he is, safe and sound."

"Let him go," said Beryl quickly. "I think he may want to go now—a long way."

But Uncle Doctor had other ideas. He closed his pocket knife with a snap.

"Me and him will go have a little powwow," he said after the fashion of one who saw no opening for argument. "I got a gun in my boot and a bowie knife down the back of my neck, Mr. Red Handsome, so suppose we step?"

"Red Handsome stood very still, staring at Beryl. Her eyes met his frankly, levelly. What she read in his look touched her; there was love there, the best thing about the man. And it was that love which had held him here in the neighborhood of High Mesa when, but for it, he would long ago have gone safely—a long way.

SLOWLY at last she turned away, sighing a little. His head jerked up, he stood an instant erect and rigid like a man facing rifle muzzles and determined not to wince. Then without a word or a backward glance he strode off through the garden with Uncle Doctor watchfully dogging his heels.

And Jerry became fully conscious only then that his hands, which had locked so tight about Beryl's, had never let go!

"I don't understand——" he said a second time.

This time Beryl laughed softly.

"And I called you a thief—and thought it was the candlesticks! And those earrings —look!" Yes, early as was the day she had them on and had worn them for hours. "Maria, run, quick; breakfast for a gentleman who comes home—home, do you hear? After long absence. May I have my hands now, Mr. Sommers? At least one of them; my nose itches!"

There was nothing for Jerry to do but laugh with her and reluctantly to release her hands.

"I'll tell you all about it over coffee," said Beryl. "Before my grandfather and his guests come down."

"He doesn't know?" said Jerry quickly.

She stood on the doorstep looking at him wonderingly.

"No," she said at last, "he doesn't know." But she spoke as though she were thinking of other matters. She kept looking at him in that queer fashion; then just a hint of a grave smile touched her lips. "Jerry Sommers, do you know I believe you're just exactly like a little boy I used to know? Do you remember——"

"I remember everything! How you looked, what you said——"

Maria was watching them, mouth open, eyes incredibly round, with no thought of obeying that command to run quick. Beryl laughed at her, repeated the com-

mand and led the way into the big house just awaking to a new day—and to a cozy breakfast table—and most of all to a deal of explanation on both sides.

Chapter XVIII

A GAME OF CHANCE

"HOW on earth did you find out?" Jerry asked the bright-eyed girl across the table from him.

"I didn't find out! I was told. Forty wee sma' voices dinned it into my deaf ears before I would listen to any one of them. Last night when Charlie Fernandez in a rage called Red Handsome a pretender, and said he could unmask him, it meant nothing to me. On top of that the word slipped from you, 'impostor.' The two coming together started me, I guess. Then what a landslide, if you don't mind your metaphors mixed. You said the day we met at the Empire that you had known me a long time ago; you knew my name. You gave me these." Her finger tip set an earring brushing her cheek. "Uncle Doctor let out that he had known you, when you were a little boy. You had red hair, *my* what red hair! You knew your way in the dark to the place the letter and money were hidden. Dear me, what a 'mysterious stranger' all along! On top of this, once the light was let in just a crack, it was strange how that other man, whom I guess we'll have to call Red Handsome for want of another name, had forgotten so much that I remembered. Really the only odd thing is that I didn't know almost from the beginning; but the thing was too incredible for one even to suspect."

"By the way," he said abruptly, "the poor devil must be as hungry as I am ——"

"While you were making yourself beautiful to come to breakfast, Maria loaded a tray and sent it out to him. But you haven't told me how you managed to bring him back. I suppose that all you had to do was go to your charming friend, Señora Fernandez and——"

"Wait till I tell you! If you could only have seen her plane roaring along after an empty car, like a mad hornet. And I'll bet the Empress will be just as mad as a fiery-tempered old hornet would be if he tackled a prey just sheet-iron."

Beryl listened in sheer wonderment and, before the tale was done, shivered.

"Is there no wickedness that terrible woman does not dare?" she cried hotly. "What is to be the end? Is she to go on and on, from crime to crime, with so many of us knowing her for what she is, yet with her beyond the reach of the law? Dick Kingsbury's death and now Bob's; raids on both Little Mesa and the Alamo Springs——"

"A little later," said Jerry soberly, "I want you to read my father's letter. There is no doubt that she was responsible for his death; in my mind there is equally little doubt that El Bravo, always moving at her command, killed him."

THEY were in the garden when Antonio Costa came down, Jerry helping her gather the great heap of flowers which presently were to go by wagon to Little Mesa; all that flowers could do toward softening the final grim fact of a man's brief existence was to be accomplished by these fresh, fragrant dewy blossoms. There was no Kingsbury kin to wait for; the only one waiting was the dead brother lying alone under the pepper trees shading a gentle knoll; all days were alike to Bob now and it seemed best not to delay that simple ceremony of consigning the quiet body to its ultimate rest. High Mesa men were already at Little Mesa.

Antonio Costa greeted Jerry with gravely smiling courtesy, making no reference to that young man's recent abrupt departure, indicating no surprise at finding him here at so early an hour. He trusted that Mr. Boyne was quite recovered from his recent harrowing experience, and also

expressed the wish that he would honor High Mesa with his presence again and still longer.

"I have two of my very good friends staying with me for the day," he said on turning back to the house. "When you and Beryl have finished here you will come in and meet them?"

Between Beryl and Jerry it had been agreed that nothing of Beryl's discovery was to be told Costa for the present. At least nothing would be said until after his guests had gone; Beryl promised that willingly enough.

"But then," she said firmly, "he must know. We have no right to keep such knowledge from him. Of course I recognized the disturbing fact immediately that you and not he own High Mesa. And you will have to be like the villain in the old melodrama and evict the poor old man and his lovely little granddaughter. What *was* your idea? Would you have gone on and on and on, wondering how you could break the news to us?"

He strove to explain. There was no haste, and he had wanted to see what could be salvaged for Señor Costa; Red Handsome still had money, and there was that other money which it appeared he had paid to the Empress to secure her aid. If she would but be patient——

SEÑOR COSTA beckoned from a window. His friends were about and could not start their day aright without a bright morning smile from Beryl; also they wanted to shake Mr. Boyne by the hand. Jerry was presented to the two, General Valdez, an elderly Mexican, very soldierly with bristling white mustaches and the air of a grand duke; Mr. Vetters, a man of sixty, a successful American business man from the cut of his clothes to the cut of his eye. The names, Valdez and Vetters, were vaguely familiar; he felt that he had heard them recently but with Beryl ready to start—she had promised that she would ride with him to Little Mesa, leaving the wagon to follow—he gave really very little thought to the two elderly gentlemen. Such individuals existed; one could not but be conscious of the fact. But they did not matter in the least.

At Little Mesa Elmer Blodgett, seeing them coming, met them and was clearly relieved to have them arrive. The flowers came in the wagon from the ranch; Beryl, carrying an armful, went into the house. Jerry in a few words told his old friend of the night's happenings. Elmer heard him out, merely grunting now and then, and at the end remarked dryly, "struck you as funny, didn't it, the old lady and her nice little boy chasing after a car and no doubt blowing it all to pieces about the size of your finger-nail? I guess it would be funny—with another man's car!"

Later when all was in readiness Antonio Costa came to pay his last respects to a neighbor. None here had known Bob Kingsbury long, yet when at last they turned away from the flowery hillock covering two companionable graves, there was in each heart a little monument of kindly thoughts and memories. And there were quiet tears from over-full hearts. Elmer Blodgett cleared his throat and hurried after Costa who had gone ahead, head down and profoundly thoughtful.

"Mr. Costa," said Elmer. "He—Bob, you know—left something for you. I guess I'd better fork it over."

He gave the scrap of paper to Costa who took it wonderingly and read it in growing wonder.

"But he returns Little Mesa to me! I do not understand, Señor Blodgett!"

"There are a good many things which take a lot of understanding," Elmer conceded. "Well, things most generally come out in the wash."

"Eh?" said Costa. "Oh, yes." He

looked Elmer over keenly and in the end appeared disposed toward a sudden new friendliness. With a faint smile he invited, "Your friend Mr. Boyne is staying with us at High Mesa. I hope you, too, will honor us? Both my granddaughter and I will be delighted."

"Me, too," Elmer accepted eagerly.

THAT afternoon in the cool, pleasant patio Jerry, at Beryl's insistence, told something of his last night's adventures. No reference was made to the fact that a certain individual who had passed himself off among them as Gerald Sommers was at present immured in the stone grain house, very much under Uncle Doctor's eagle eye; but the Empress's high-hand methods were made sufficiently clear. That she had been responsible for the raids on the two neighboring ranches was touched on; that she had attacked the two fugitives from the Empire with machine-guns and bombs was added that there might be no doubt as to the sort of thing she would do being given provocation and opportunity.

General Valdez' mustaches bristled more than ever and his black eyes snapped.

"Even in Mexico City I have heard of this lady," he said dryly. "It would appear that she is very—let us say that she is very resourceful. But this story of raids and murders! Of coming after a car into United States territory and throwing bombs at it——"

He lifted his immaculate hands eloquently. Jerry flushed.

"The car itself ought to be Exhibit A," he said briefly. "I've no doubt that a short drive would show it to you in such condition that even the incredulous would see the truth."

"It was insured for fire, theft, transportation and collision," said Elmer lugubriously. "I thought the feller that wrote the insurance stuck everything in it he could think of, but he forgot machine-guns and dynamite!"

IT WAS in the dusk that Jerry and Beryl went treasure-hunting. Out in the pasture all one had to do was start at a certain old tree, take nine steps due north, four steps due east, five steps north again—and unearth an ancient tin tobacco box containing not a cent less than forty-three pennies! It had been Costa himself, though not definitely specifying what they should do, who had hinted that the two might find it more pleasant outside than in the house. It appeared that he wanted a few words alone with his old friends, and Jerry jumped at the opportunity to go on this errand with Beryl, reviving old memories.

"It ought to be right here," said Jerry, looking up from the hole he had shoveled. "And it's gone! Robber! You came and lifted the treasure!"

"Goose!" Beryl promptly named him. "It's the wrong place."

"It's not. I remembered every number and direction——"

"And forgot that a man six feet high and maybe higher takes a longer step than a little boy a dozen years old!"

Together they unearthed the "treasure."

"Forty-three there'll be," he said, shaking the box for her to hear.

"Forty-three is right," said Beryl, her eyes dancing at him in the dusk.

"Though originally, when a boy and girl I used to know brought them here, there were forty-five."

"Yes," said Beryl nodding, her eyes dancing more than ever.

The boy took out one and gave it to the little girl; the little girl took out one and gave it to the boy." He pulled out his wallet and from its depths produced a penny. She opened a hand which she had kept all the while tight shut and the two pennies, of even date, which had traveled so far apart during fifteen years once again chinked ever so merrily together.

"Why, there goes the car from the garage," exclaimed Beryl suddenly. "Grandfather is taking his friends some-

where—the rascal got us out of the way so he could run-out on me!"

"Never mind," laughed Jerry. "Give the boys a chance. We haven't counted all our wealth to make sure of it."

"He is up to something," Beryl insisted. "He did send us out of his way. That was because he knew I'd stop him——"

At the house they learned that Costa and his friends had left word and excuses. Also there was a brief little note for Beryl:

"My Little One: Do not be worried if we are late. My friends have a curiosity to look in at the casino at the Empire. I, too, shall play a little, for I feel sure that this time I am going to win a lot of money to buy my little one nice things with. Excuse me to our good friend Jerry.

"A. A. C."

"Great Scott!" said Jerry.

"You don't think that they are going into danger! Oh, Jerry, I am afraid!"

"Not physical danger," he reassured her promptly and with conviction. "Men like your grandfather and his friends, this general from Mexico—no, they're all right. But it's mere dollars and cents I am thinking about. Do you know if Señor Costa has any considerable sum available for ready squandering?"

There was that money, several thousands, which he had taken from behind the candlestick! If he staked that—and lost it! Of late her grandfather puzzled and worried her.

"Look here," Jerry went on when he saw her hesitation. "He and his friends, both of whom I'll warrant are plungers, once they get going, are up against a crooked wheel down there at the Casino, and I don't for a minute doubt it. There's nothing simpler on earth than fixing a roulette table so that its owner simply can't lose. And do you suppose that the Empress, when it's a question of big money, is going to overlook a bet? Not for a moment. Your grandfather——"

He broke off sharply. All of a sudden, now that his mind was open to suggestions connected with roulette, he remembered where he had recently heard the two names, General Valdez and Mr. Vetters. He had heard them only last night from the Empress herself; she had invited him to look in the next night and see how a couple of high-rollers paid handsome toll for their moment of pleasure across her table. That last wink of hers had told volumes.

"I'm going along," he concluded almost savagely. For it struck him that already old Antonio Costa had lost enough at this woman's hands; if a warning could stop the trio of old sports, that warning was going to be given.

"Not after last night!" she cried in horror. "You mustn't, you mustn't go; better if they lose some money. You'd be killed!"

"I'm going," said Jerry stubbornly, "but I'm going to run no chances; the world begins to look to me to be too nice a place, a regular jim-dandy inhabited by a most bewilderingly, amazingly, adorably——"

"Sh!" she laughed at him.

"I'll try to overtake them; you'll stake me to a car, won't you? Oh, I'll promise not to get it all blown up like Elmer's. And I'm taking little old Elmer along, and old Doc—and we'll just bristle all over with rifles, shotguns, pistols, butcher knives and so on, like—like old General Valdez's mustache!"

THERE was a two-seater at his disposal, and Beryl watched the car whizz away into the night; though it did not bristle the way which Jerry had prophesied, still she knew that the men hurrying south in it were fully, if discreetly armed. They were three men whom she judged eminetly capable of taking care of themselves; then, too, her grandfather, the old General and Mr. Vetters knew their own way about. Further, with the Gen-

eral always there went two men who looked like prizefighters, and Mr. Vetters was accompanied by his "secretary"—a very alert and muscular young man. Nine men altogether, and everyone of them would have his eyes open. Beryl decided that everything was all right, and prepared for another night of it.

And the nine did enter the gates at the Empire together. Jerry had driven the second car and made every endeavor to overhaul the first, but it grew evident that the three old men on their way to their rendezvous with my Lady Luck, or Maid Misfortune, were as ardent as so many Romeos. It was only as they were alighting at their journey's end that Jerry caught up with them; the gate was swinging open in the high wall when he hailed them.

"Señor Costa," he called, hurrying forward. "May I have a word with you?"

Costa, all impatience to get ahead with the night's pastime, asked rather curtly what was wanted and did not appear in any way delighted to discover that he had been followed.

"I only thought it fair to warn you," said Jerry bluntly, "that table is as crooked as a dog's hind leg and I know it. Now that you know it, and I don't see how you could have thought it anything else, no doubt you will wish to tell your friends. Last night I had a few words with the Empress; it's as clear as——"

"Thank you, señor," interrupted Costa stiffly. "You are most kind. I am quite sure that you mean well. Nevertheless we have promised Señora Fernandez and she expects us. We shall be glad to have you come with us—if you judge it wise to put in an appearance here so soon?"

The others, having hung on their heels a moment, were already entering the grounds. Jerry, though he wanted to swear at Costa and his starchy ways which he put on and off like a starched shirt, beckoned to his two companions and followed the others. It was fortunate, he meditated, that they accompanied the Costa party; Jerry had no doubt that had he come alone there would have been for him fewer bows and a less courteous invitation to enter.

EARLY as they were, all was ready at the Casino. By the time they had laid aside their coats and had joined Señor Costa at the little bar in a toast to their absent hostess, she was no longer absent but came in at the door to greet them gaily. At her heels came Prince Charlie; it was his gasp which stopped his mother in the first sentence of her welcome. For his prominent eyes had fallen, full of amazement, on Jerry and rested on him in a perplexed, incredulous stare.

The Empress frowned and her cold blue eyes hardened. To her as to her startled son the vanishment of two red-haired men from an automobile under fire had constituted an annoying mystery. The car had been wrecked by a well placed bomb which had blown it literally to bits; all evidence which might have been afforded by two belt-straps lashing a steering wheel had been destroyed; that the car had driven itself was not to be thought of. Then where had its occupants flown? Had they been shattered to shreds too small to be located? Not even a boot left hanging on a bush? A thoroughly mystified and angry Empress had spent a day in useless pondering, and now Jerry's coolly smiling face did nothing to alleviate her feelings.

But hers was not an equilibrium to be turned topsy-turvy as easily as her son's. There was only that quick frown and the hardening of the keen blue eyes, then she ignored Jerry quite as she was ignoring the strong-arm men, so obviously only that, who accompanied her guests.

"These two gentlemen, señora," said

Costa affably, "are my best of good friends, the General Benito Valdez and Mr. Ellsworth W. Vetters of Pasadena. You expected them, no? They sometimes like to amuse themselves at roulette, and I have asured them," and here he made her his elaborate bow, his hand on his heart, "that here they might be assured of both an adequate bank and fair play."

SHE awaited somewhat impatiently for him to finish.

"I expected them," she said crisply, and looked curiously from the two back to Costa. "They wrote and I've got a bank ready that ought to give 'em a run for their money; if they bust it they'll be taking off a wad of money that even Valdez and Vetters oughtn't to be ashamed of. I didn't know, though, that they were friends of yours."

"Ah!" was all that Costa said in answer, and both Valdez and Vetters merely inclined their heads and looked at the Empress with frank curiosity. Costa himself was already glancing at the table. "Shall we start?" he asked, smiling. "To begin with, to show my friends how the little table behaves itself, I am of a notion to risk a few thousands myself!"

"A few thousands?" said the Empress and looked at him with new interest. "Fine. Shoot the works. Ortiz," she commanded, all business, "let's get going."

Ortiz, that same croupier whom Jerry had once already watched here serenely presiding over the vagaries of the small ivory ball and whirring wheel, a dandefied young Mexican with gambler and crook written all over him, took his place at the table. At that moment and for the first time Jerry became conscious of El Bravo's presence just within the door; the man had entered at the Empress's heels and stood there, inconspicuous but ready at hand if required. What caused Jerry to note him at all was a sudden start that Uncle Doctor, standing shoulder to shoulder, gave. Uncle Doctor during the day had read a certain five-year-old letter entrusted to him by Jerry; for the first time since reading it he looked straight into the cold, bleak eyes of the man who, he was as sure as he cared to be, had shot his old friend and employer. Now Uncle Doctor grew as stiff-bodied as a hound quivering at the end of a leash. Yet he held himself very still; he even put a quick hand on Jerry's shoulder and muttered under his breath:

"Not now. But soon, if God is good! That man is mine. Go easy, kid. Steady! Get your eye on the play."

COSTA had taken a chair and was putting his money on the table in plain sight. Jerry, thrusting nearer, saw that there were really "a few thousands." Bank notes and some gold pieces. And as he saw, and observed old Costa's placid guileless, down-right innocent old face all wreathed in smiles, he did not know whether he resented more the Empress's merciless exploitation of the old fellow, or Costa's infernally irritating nonchalance as he prepared to squander his few thousands. However, all that he could do was shrug and watch; here was really no affair of his, though, had he known that that money on the table was his money, he might have been tempted to make an excuse of that and halt matters at their very beginning.

Costa very coolly, while getting ready, slipped a thousand dollars out on the red and was watching neither the stake nor the ball while this first play was made. Instead he was arranging his funds in such order that he could select each bet without trouble; he did like to have things made easy. He was then lighting his first cigarette when the ball clicked and stopped at the number 36. A red number and he had won his first bet of a thousand dollars. The croupier, Ortez, gave over nursing his small, pointed mustache long enough to lean across the table and place the amount of the loss with Costa's stake. Then he gave wheel a spin and ball a whirl as though in haste to get this done

so that he could get back to his mustache.

"I feel lucky tonight, Señora," said Costa, smiling up at the Empress who gave him back a bright quick smile.

"Hop to it, Señor," she said lightly. "Me, I'm backing the bank, you know."

Jerry was not in the least surprised that Costa won the first bet; here was the old, come-on system, and there were big fish looking on and waiting to get hooked. Of course the old man would be permitted to win—for a time. That there could be any other than the one inevitable end to the night's play Jerry did not for an instant believe.

Costa had not disturbed the money, now two thousand dollars, on the red.

"I think it will be red again, no?" he said lightly. "Maybe even it will be the little number 36, repeating itself?"

So on 36 itself he put another small wager; only a hundred dollars. The lively little ball which can be so fascinating while it speeds in its gay circles, so like the spoken word of fate when at last it comes to rest, flirted tantalizingly among the numbers and then, most obliging of little fellows, it gleamed up at them from number 36! And Señor Costa had won a second time. Two thousand dollars on the red, thirty-five hundred dollars on number 36. Altogether, in about a minute of play, he had won six thousand five hundred dollars. Just as easy as that!

Jerry looked swiftly at the Empress. She was smiling, untroubled. He glanced at Ortiz; that young man was relinquishing his mustache in order to submit to the unspeakable ennui of setting the ball going again. Jerry's eyes traveled on and rested briefly on the figure near the door; there was a strange gleam, he thought, in El Bravo's usually lifeless eyes.

Ortiz gave the wheel a deft turn and snapped the ball, wheel spinning to the right, ball circling to the left.

"Make your bet," he invited languidly.

"I like this red color, *amigos*," murmured Señor Costa. He liked it so much that he left the four thousand dollars standing on it; the winnings from number 36 he drew to himself. And the third time in such swift succession the dancing little ball was of Costa's own tastes, and elected to stop on the red. On number 30 this time. The croupier paid the bet; another four thousand.

Jerry felt something worrying his arm; Elmer Blodgett's fingers were disporting themselves like a pair of steel pincers.

"Ain't the old one a ripper!" whispered Elmer. "Ten thousand five hundred bucks in three flips and never turned a hair!"

Costa merely looked pleased in a simple, childlike way.

"I tell you, I feel lucky tonight," he admitted. "Now, for a little system; the ball stopped once at 36, again at 36; next at 30. The number 11 is just between. What does my system say? Why, here is five hundred dollars on 36, and five hundred on 30—and an even thousand dollars on number 11! It cannot lose."

"Good Lord," groaned Jerry within himself. "It cannot win! System! There goes two thousand back where——"

"Click!" said the laughing little ball. Well, wonders do happen now and then. It must have ben exactly of Costa's mind, doubtful about both 36 and 30. And with all the rest of the field open to it it snuggled down and went to sleep between those two—on number 11. And Antonio Arenda Costa had won thirty-five thousand dollars, and lost one thousand. A nice little profit of thirty-four thousand.

Elmer was babbling in Jerry's ear:

"Forty-four thousand, five hundred, in four passes! Oh, mama! Watch him roll. This is his night to howl, and can he?"

Jerry shook him off and again his eyes ran like lightning from face to face of three individuals in whom just then he was tremendously interested. The croupier was twisting his mustache; was he just a little bit swifter about that affair than before, and his hands harder? Certainly there had passed across the Empress's cold blue eyes a faint hint of shadow. Cer-

tainly El Bravo's eyes did have life in them.

"I am glad of the opportunity, Señora," said Costa graciously, "to show my friends how kind your table can be."

"The ball's spinning," said the Empress coldly.

"Ah," said Costa. But he merely drew all his winnings to him and made no move to place a bet. The ball circled, hesitated in its skittish way and rested on a black 28. Costa smiled. The croupier gave a rather zestful start to wheel and ball again and the old Spaniard shoved out every cent he had in front of him, upward of fifty thousand dollars to await fate upon a black field.

"I like to play fast," he said ingenuously, and watched with the frankest of interest while the ball and wheel seemed in less haste than ever before to decide a very simple matter.

THIS time Jerry did not watch the table but was hawk-eyed for the slightest play of expression on the mask-like face of Señora Fernandez. He heard at last the familiar, expected click—and saw for a flashing instant a little look almost of horror in her eyes. He whirled to the table. Black it was and Costa had won—the croupier was counting to make sure the exact amount. Costa had won another snug little bet, this time fifty-one thousand seven hundred dollars.

There were men in the room to whom fifty thousand dollars was a small affair, General Valdez of Mexico City who was rated at several millions, Vetters of the East and West S. S. Line who was worth several of General Valdez. But none the less every man was watching in an interest which had become breathless; here, at least, were large possibilities and here was the Goddess Luck in one of her most intriguing phases.

Jerry tried to make the croupier out and thought—barely suspected, rather—that that young man was a bit nervous. Certainly there was a deal of vigor put into the next speeding of ball and wheel.

And then never was Jerry so beset to fight down one of his heady impulses. It was only a glance, only a suspicion of a glance, but it did pass between Señora Fernandez and her croupier. And it did say, "Enough of this nonsense! Stop it!" Jerry wanted with all his heart to lay violent hands on the immaculate shoulders in front of him; to yank old Costa up out of his chair and out of his placid simplicity; to throw him into his car and haul him safely home. Here Costa had in front of him a good hundred thousand dollars, and the old chap was in debt, mortgaged up to the white eyebrows! Another roll, and he'd lose. It was as sure as fate, as sure as a crooked wheel could make sure. Why he had been allowed to win this much—well, no doubt the big play was yet to come when Valdez and Vetters warmed up and plunged in. As yet they gave no sign of being of a mind to pass beyond the stage of spectatorship.

Jerry fought with his impulse and throttled it. No use. Well, look at it one way, Costa in the end would be losing actually only those "few thousands" with which he had begun.

Costa's shapely old fingers, very steady and insouciant, placed a bet. Saying something about "My system," he put a thousand dollars on number 28, a thousand on each of its neighbors, 7 and 12—and put every other cent he had out on the black. It was to be remarked that both 7 and 12 were black numbers, 28 red. That no doubt had something to do with Costa's system.

And now while ball and wheel went their opposite ways toward a final adjustment which was fraught with a very considerable importance, Jerry with difficulty kept his gaze away from the table and bent it on Ortiz's face. The man was rigid, his fingers were still; there was the hint of perplexity in the black eyes fairly glittering from under lowered lids.

"Click!" said the ball, and Ortiz stiffened and flinched. Elmer Blodgett forgot

himself and hurled his hat up to the ceiling and whooped. The most obliging, downright lovable roulette ball in all this world of exasperating roulette tables, had settled itself down as if to stay for all time on number 7. Seven and black! And Antonio Arenda Costa had again, incredible as it seemed, incredible even as luck itself always is, made a fifth consecutive winning. This time to the chiming tune of about one hundred and thirty-five thousand dollars. And if anything beyond this amazing fact was clear, that other thing was that the Empress had paled and was looking bright, naked daggers at Ortiz—and that Ortiz looked frightened.

"Well, Ortiz!" cried the Empress in a sort of contained, throttled fury. "Señor Costa won—I think this time one hundred thirty-six thousand four hundred dollars. Can you count that high? The money is in the drawer."

Ortiz counted swiftly and paid. Then he stepped back.

"Señora," he said in a voice oddly like her own had been, "I am not feeling well. Perhaps you will excuse? And take my place?"

It was like a challenge, that last. She stared at him, then nodded and stepped to the place he vacated.

"Make your plays, gents and ladies," she rasped out with a poor attempt at nonchalance; obviously, Jerry decided, things had gone all the wrong way and she was troubled and mystified.

"Now," cried Costa, and stood up, "we will have some fun, no, Señora? We two, old-timers at roulette, eh?" He made her his delightful bow. "At roulette, Señora, as in love and war we play to win—do we not? Now——"

She sped the wheel one way and snapped the ball the other.

"Make your bet," she said shortly.

He made his bets while the ball rolled, seeming to be in no haste, yet having five wagers staked in time. A thousand dollars each on five numbers. And this time he lost, and the loss cost him an even five thousand dollars. He appeared pleased.

"This is fine!" he cried cheerily. "It was growing monotonous, was it not? Like business and not play! Now we shall see, eh, Señora? You and I."

"You and me; right," she retorted. "Dog eat dog and—let's go!"

The ball started, but Costa appeared undecided. He meditated a moment then cried out, "Red once more!" and as cool about the matter as though he were betting a last year's bird's nest, he placed his entire capital on the red. A look—Jerry read it for triumph—flashed up in the Empress's eyes. When the ball stopped she was looking a bit tauntingly at Costa's face; she seemed so very sure that she knew that it would not be red again.

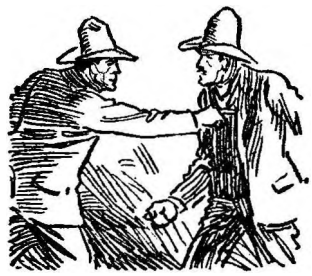
But red it was.

The woman actually rubbed her eyes. She stood as still as a statue save for the slight quiver of a lower lip caught between her teeth. Then without a word she counted Costa's bet and paid it. That little final transaction—for final it was—cost her this time a full two hundred and thirty-one thousand dollars.

Paying, she snapped the drawer shut.

"Gents, that'll be all this time," she said rather coolly—all things considered—and Jerry knew that there were other matters to consider beyond her mere financial loss. "Some other time if you say; now, the bank's busted!"

"But surely——" began old General



Valdez, both eager and disappointed.

"Nix. No. Not." she snapped at him. "I guess this ends this party, boys. Come again." She went to the door, turning

her back on them and stopped, staring straight into El Bravo's strangely bright eyes. "You come along with me. You and me are going to have a talk."

Jerry, with a start coming out of a brief daze, caught Uncle Doctor's arm.

"Let's make it snappy getting these old sports out of here and tucked into bed," he whispered anxiously. "Maybe the night's work is done—and then again maybe it's not!"

"Right, kid. First, we go after the lights. Out they go and out we go same time."

So it was in the dark and in a close packed little party that the nine men left the Empire Casino.

Chapter XIX

SOME EXPLANATIONS

AM I dreaming?" gasped Elmer when they came safely to their parked car. "Did the old Spanish cavalier actually get away with more than two hundred and fifty thousand berries? And is the queen of Sheba pulling in her horns and just waving a smiling farewell to that hefty wad of condensed sunshine?"

"Quick," commanded Jerry. "Pile in. Come on, Doc. We're going to scout ahead a bit; like Elmer, I seem to feel we're dreaming. It's too easy!"

At the wheel he waited only until he heard the motor of Costa's limousine, then led the way.

"Keep your eyes glued on the road, kid," said Blodgett. "Leave it to me and Doc to watch both sides. You wouldn't think she'd start anything, would you? But did you see her eyes? If ever there was a woman mad enough to explode and blow the whole doggone world up along with her, it's Little Louise! And if you'll hear me, when she stabbed our old pal, El Bravo, with those same eyes of hers ——"

"Watch the road," snapped Jerry. He had the uneasy sensation that history was about to repeat itself, though perhaps with a fresh quirk leading to a new ending; here he was again turning his back on an angry Empress who, he thought, had more reason than before to seek to detain her departing guests.

"If she meant to cut up," said Uncle Doctor thoughtfully, "she'd never have let us ramble this far——"

"Don't be too sure!" Jerry told him swiftly. "She wasn't prepared for a loss, was she? Something went wrong with her infernal table; and it had her guessing right to the finish. Then we made as lively a getaway as the law ever allowed. She had no chance——"

The horn of the car following honked several times and Jerry understood that he was being requested to deliver a burst of speed and very promptly obliged. The two cars, one only a hundred feet behind the other, sped northward along the narrow white road among the dusty willows. The tiny Empire village was just yonder, off to the left, twinkling through the scattering trees; at its edge, between village and race-course, was the hangar where the Hawk was kept. And Jerry, without turning his head aside, was conscious of a single light racing across a field, lantern or flashlight borne swiftly along. He set his teeth and jammed down his accelerator ——

"Hear it!" cried Elmer, and his hand grasped Jerry's shoulder. "That's the whirr of her damned plane——"

Jerry heard, hesitated, slowed down and came to a stop with a chauffeur behind him cursing him roundly and jamming on his own brakes barely in time to avoid a collision. Jerry paid him not the slightest attention but jumped down and ran back to Costa's car.

"She's getting her plane out already," he barked out as several faces stared out at him wonderingly through the dark. "Think she'd let you trot off this way with a quarter of a million on you? This time there'll be no warning bombs. If there's anything certain on earth it is this: the Empress and Charlie are out for big

game, and they'll simply blow both cars up——"

"My dear boy," said Costa in a tone which made Jerry feel that he was actually smiling, "I am sure that you are allowing yourself——"

"I know!" cried Jerry angrily. "Our only chance, if we've got any at all, is to pile out and take to cover on foot. You'll not forget that it was only last night that I was in this very same sort of a mess, and a second time—no, thanks! But if we leave the cars——"

"Señor," said Costa, still patiently but with somewhat sharper emphasis, "you are mistaken. The plane will not follow us. That I know. No matter how; you may take it from me that I know what I am saying."

There was so much conviction in his tone that for an instant Jerry was ready to accept, as a very odd fact, that Costa knew whereof he spoke and that the sensible thing to do therefore was to get back into his car and lead on. But by now Elmer and Uncle Doctor had both run back to him; Elmer was again worrying his arm, muttering, "Shut up! Listen! Sure it's the plane; they're going up."

At that Costa stepped down and peered off toward the hangar, listening as intently as they did. When he spoke it was in a troubled voice, "I—I don't understand! I had every assurance—Ah! Yes, it is the plane and—gentlemen, *amigos!*—I very much fear I have led you into a—ah—Señor Jerry names it a mess! Look! You can see it! And I was so sure, so confident!"

"I think the young man is quite right," said Ellsworth Vetters briskly. "Leave the cars here; they're too sweet a target. We can slip off through the willows; we can be miles away before daylight——"

"It is I who brought my friends into this affair," cried Costa ringingly. "It is I who will draw them safely out of it. If necessary—yes, I will even give back what I have won."

"No!" rapped out old Benito Valdez, and his mustaches must have bristled then as never before. "*Por Dios*, it would be an infamous thing if we men——"

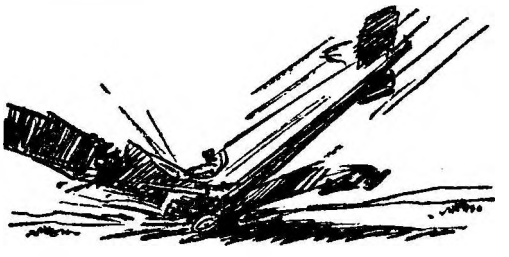
"There she zooms!" cut in Elmer. "You can see the baby against the sky. Up she goes. And if you gents are going to stand here all night and wait for something to come down—*Adios!* I'm going somewhere *pronto!*"

BUT, fascinated, the others watched and even Elmer, finding himself alone, stopped and gawked. The Hawk had taxied down the field and had risen gracefully, bending its course into a wide arc when once clear of the ground, cutting back toward the road. Impatient for altitude it rose sharply——

"Good God!" someone cried. "It's falling! Look out——"

Some five hundred feet up there against the stars something had gone wrong; Jerry's thought, from the way the thing flopped crazily sidewise, was that a wing had crumpled. He stood rigid and horrified and helpless; one forgot who those two were who were falling and remembered only that they were living, sentient human beings—and that in another ghastly moment—— You wanted to drag your eyes away from it and could not; you wanted to lift a hand somehow to check that awful plunge earthward.

There was one long scream, vibrant, terrified, terrible. Did it come from the



mother or son? Or from some one below who watched in horror which at last broke vocally from some wide gaping mouth?

A great black body falling plummetwise, straight down, the hissing of the air

through which it hurtled, so near was it —the dull thud as so much tonnage of steel and wood impacted with the earth —a roar then as of a battery of cannons and a great tower of fire rushing fiercely sky-high.

"An act of God!" burst out Ellsworth Vetters excitedly.

"An act of a man," whispered old Antonio Costa.

"And those bombs meant for us," cried Elmer Blodgett in a queer gabbling voice, "have simply blown clean to hell the one ——"

"Sh!" muttered Jerry. "Come. We can do nothing here—and I think we had better go. There still remains El Bravo."

AT HIGH MESA Antonio Arenda Costa coming slowly, deep in thought, down the winding stone staircase was confronted by two young people who jumped up and came to meet him, full of expectancy. Both General Valdez and Ellsworth Vetters had gone to their rooms, escorted by their friend Costa himself. Jerry and Beryl left alone in the big living room had talked with never a pause, at times both together and now Beryl, still gripped by the horror of the thing which she had listened to, ran to her grandfather.

"Now tell us!" she demanded eagerly. "Tell us quickly! Everything! I am dying to know."

"Yes, yes," he said, and seemed curiously tense. "I have promised to tell you and now I shall. We are going to sit down, though. This night, filled as it has been with happenings, holds yet other things still to happen. Are we ever to sleep like honest folk at High Mesa again?" He pinched Beryl's cheek. "Last night you never closed an eye, my Little One. Tonight, too, you are like a little owl! Will you run and bring us something to drink? Then we will talk."

He frowned, not irritably yet with profound concentration, while Beryl brought decanter and glasses. He poured himself a brimming glass of red wine, looked up sharply and as he raised his glass to his lips bent his eyes steadily on Jerry.

"With all sincerity I drink to your health, Gerald Sommers!" he said gravely.

Both Jerry and Beryl gasped.

"You knew!"

Costa smiled and sipped.

"From the beginning, almost. From that first day when our good young friend here was so eager to know about his father —when I saw so strange an agony in his eyes—when I said to myself, 'Here comes one to whom Gerald Hand Sommers meant a very, very great deal!'—from that instant I groped. You, my dear," he smiled at Beryl, "say you hate mysteries; that is the American of you! I, a Spaniard, I love them!"

"But——" began Beryl finding herself merely more mystified than before.

"No *buts,* my dear. We are now explaining things, telling a fine tale while we wait for—— Never mind. I pondered that day, I watched and listened; I even thought back to all that I had heard and seen. This young man called himself Jerry Boyne. He had red hair. He said to my little granddaughter, 'Why, your name is Beryl!' She thought that he was what you call fresh, trying to flirt. I saw that he was in earnest about everything he did. I said, 'Jerry might be Gerald.' But why 'Boyne?'"

"My mother's name,' said Jerry. "When, fool kid that I was, I flew off the handle——"

"I know. Yes, your mother's name. I have a very good memory, Mr. Jerry; I remember names. I had friends who long ago knew the Boynes of Santa Barbara very well, so you see the name itself came to me. And then I recalled that your father, whom I knew slightly before I bought High Mesa back from him, had lived a long while in Santa Barbara. Then there were other small matters——"

"Of course," nodded Beryl. "I am afraid poor Jerry isn't much of a mystery man after all; we both smoked out his secret!"

"Knowing him to be Gerald Sommers," continued Costa, meditatively twirling his glass, "I of course realized that I had ample time to strive to adjust matters——"

"You could not tell what he might do," protested Beryl.

"Oh, but I could. All I had to do was say to myself, 'This boy is fine; I see that in his eye. Also he is the son of a very splendid father and of a mother of fine family. So, what will he do? Why, he will do as I, were I in his place, would do!" Would I, Beryl, or would you turn out a poor old gentleman and his so adorable little big-eyed owl of a pretty granddaughter for the hungry coyotes to eat? Did I not tell you long ago this young man was a romantic? *Bueno!* Who is right now?"

"But," said Beryl falteringly, so hoping to have all things bright and clear, with no tarnishing speck, yet still troubled, "when you took——"

He laughed softly at her.

"I read your mind in a flash! When I took the money, no? The money which we both knew belonged to Gerald Sommers? It was a loan, that was all; I knew I should return it and I knew, too, that so richly generous a young man would never deny me the use of it. But," and he looked stern and grave all of a sudden, "I took no chances with my honor, my dear. In my room you might find a memorandum; it acknowledged having borrowed that money; it called attention to the fact that High Mesa would go back to our friend Jerry, improved by at least fifty thousand dollars I had spent on it! That was fair, wasn't it? Oho, I am a business man!"

Beryl decided that he was, and looked brighter. Yet there remained a last perplexity to darken her eyes once again.

"That man—El Bravo," she whispered.

"Now," said Costa, "we come to the big thing."

He put down his glass and grew silent over a cigarette in the meticulous making.

"It is like this," he said at last, evidently having taken a moment to get his thoughts in proper sequence. "One thing; many silly people who think themselves wise say that we Spaniards are fools about money. That, perhaps, is merely because there are other things we care more for; we like money, yes, but we like other things more. Among those other things is pride. Yes, we are proud; we have reason and even if we did not have reason, still would we have pride. And I found that unfortunate woman, Señora Fernandez, treating me like a fool; that certain Señor Red Handsome treating me like a fool. It was my pride that would not tolerate such a suspicion! I said to myself that I would show some people a few Americano tricks! Aha!

"I began with Frank Smith. This El Bravo, say you, is a bad man? If a man knows *a, b* and *c* he knows that. He is not one to trust; he is absolutely no-good. Eh? *Bueno.* A man like that is for sale. I bought him. I put him in my pocket. I had him come here two times, two times only—and it would seem that both times this little miss knew all about him coming! I must be careful. If I have a love affair ——"

"Grandfather," commanded Beryl, all impatience and strengthening hope, "please!"

"I said to Mr. El Bravo, 'You all think me a fool, no? You think that I, who all my life have been playing games of chance, have not come to have my suspicions about Señora Fernandez' roulette table?' I laughed at him and he wondered what it was all about. I told him; you would have taken us for two mighty fine friends—Antonio Arenda Costa and El Bravo! I told him that I was no mechanic or anything of that kind and did not know and did not care to know what electromagnetic currents or wires were. But that I did know the wheel down there at the Casino was manipulated; that it could be controlled all very simply by the croupier; and that what had been done sub-rosa to make it a dishonest wheel could be undone."

Beryl, who had found it hard to contain herself, clapped her hands now.

"You bribed him to make the wheel work for you!"

"Chiquitita!" he reproved her, and looked horrified. "Are you a child then, to speak like that? Or is it that girls do not understand? No! El Bravo, when I bought him and put him into my pocket, wanted to make the wheel work for me. I employed self-control, a virtue which you Americans must learn yet from us Spaniards; I did not kick him down the steps. But I told him that I wanted an honest wheel; that was all. He must tear out the wires or magnets or whatever it was; he must arrange so that no one could control what was going to happen. That was all that I wanted, all that any man of honor could ever want. I knew my cause was just; I knew God would be with me. And I won!"

He ended with a chuckle. No; merely paused and then spoke again swiftly:

"I am glad that I won no more than I did. It was really owing me, or at least most of it. All that I was cheated out of by Red Handsome and the Empress came back to me from Señora Fernandez. And a little more! He shrugged and chuckled again. "For interest and my trouble!"

"If it had not chanced that your friends, General Valdez and Mr. Vetters came to play, there would not have been so much money in the bank and——"

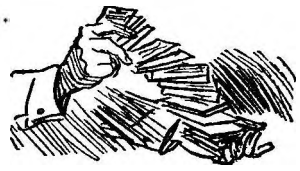
"You see the hand of Providence as Señor Vetters saw it when the plane crashed? No, señor. It was I who begged my two friends to come and make the appointment! It was I who asked them to warn Señora Fernandez that it would be necessary to have plenty of money to make it worth their whiles! Aha! *Americano* tricks, no?"

Jerry and Beryl looked at each other.

"I'd say," grinned Jerry, "pure Latin guile! What gets me is that you could trust El Bravo, even having bought him!"

"I gave him, in his hand, five thousand dollars. He has cold eyes, but I think they burned holes in the night. Then I told him that I would play for big money, maybe a hundred thousand, maybe more—and that he was perfectly welcome to one dollar out of every ten that I made! You see? Mr. El Bravo makes tonight above thirty thousand dollars."

Jerry got up abruptly and walked restlessly up and down the long room. Costa watching him narrowly, said a quiet "Sh" to Beryl. Jerry turned to a window as though his need were to commune with the outside night; but all curtains were closely drawn. He glanced through an open door and saw Elmer Blodgett standing over a small round table, idly shuffling a deck of cards; he had forgotten Elmer who had withdrawn a few minutes ago to leave Jerry alone with Beryl. He came back slowly and stood looking down into Costa's face.



"El Bravo killed my father," he said quietly.

"Ah! And I trafficked with this same El Bravo." Costa rose slowly to his feet. He put his hands on Jerry's shoulders. "My son——" he began, then broke off sharply. With an almost incredible swiftness those two agile white hands of his darted under Jerry's coat and in an instant he had whipped the old forty-five out of its loose holster.

"Listen to me!" cried Costa then, springing back. He was of a sudden as stern as inexorable as fate itself. "Listen, I tell you! I did not know this when I traded with El Bravo; I knew him for a villain but not for all that he is. Nevertheless I traded with him, and I gave him my word—and señor, my word is my word, though it had been that we had to do with no El Bravo but with Judas himself! Do you understand? Is that clear?"

"El Bravo is coming here—now," said Jerry.

"El Bravo, when his time comes, will sink straight down to hell with the weight of his crimes! You are to listen, I tell you! I feared that that plane might follow —I spoke to El Bravo of it. And he promised me that it would not follow; he would put it out of commission so that it would take hours to fix it. By that time he meant to have his money and be far away. And——"

"And knowing that she would know he had double-crossed her and would hunt him down to the ends of the earth—he weakened the wings strutts or did some such devilish thing. And you——"

Jerry's anger was flaring up. Costa stepped back, his old hand hard on the pistol butt.

"El Bravo is coming. Yes, now! I gave him my promise, señor, my very sacred word of honor that he should come assured of my good faith. And now I tell you this; I would die, señor, now this very night—or if need be I would shoot you down, my dearest good friend, rather than betray even one like El Bravo! Is that clear?"

"Good!" said El Bravo, and sneered.

THE three started and whirled. El Bravo had come in quietly at the window left open for him, had entered as once before both Jerry and Beryl had known him to enter. He stood just inside, bulky and burly, stooped a little, balanced almost on his toes. Both of his big hairy hands were near his hips and locked hard about the grips of his two weapons which were very much in evidence.

"The money, Costa!" he said sharply. "Make it snappy. I'm on my way."

Costa without a word drew a packet from his pocket and tossed it into the big paw that was lightning quick to catch it.

"I have given you exactly ten percent," said Costa curtly. "You have it there. We have finished, you and I. Now—go, *hombre!*"

El Bravo's cold eyes flashed.

"Damn you——"

"Go!" cried Costa.

"You'll keep your promise?"

"Are you crazy? My word is my word. I will take no step to pursue you; I will do all in my power to protect you. But you had best go."

"All right." El Bravo stuffed the packet into his pocket, dropped his hand back to his pistol-grip and backed out of the window. "Give me an hour," he snapped. "I've a car here and I'll be——"

"Go!" cried Costa angrily.

The curtain dropped blotting out the brutal face. El Bravo had gone, no doubt running. And had gone enriched by above thirty thousand dollars, ample enough no doubt, to his way of thinking, to repay him for all that he had done to both table and plane.

"Now will you give me my gun?" demanded Jerry sternly.

"Are you, too, mad!" Costa flung back at him. "You heard me——"

Jerry gathered himself as if to spring. But before he could move there came from the garden a voice that shattered the silence with all the abruptness and sinister import of a pistol shot. It was Uncle Doctor's voice, ringing clearly:

"Go for your gun, El Bravo! For killin' Jerry's dad——"

Then came the shots themselves until it seemed that not two men alone but a dozen were firing out there. Those in the house who heard without seeing could imagine El Bravo, crouching in the shadows, blazing away desperately with both hands; they could visualize Uncle Doctor, grim and methodical and very accurate. Costa was taken all aback and was like a man who sees the stars tumbling down from their places. Jerry, seeing him off his guard, was quick to spring upon him and snatch the weapon from his lax hand, and to leap out through the window.

"Come back!" cried Beryl in an agony of fear, and Costa leaped to the window and shouted, "Come back! I tell you, come back!"

The shooting ceased as abruptly as it had

begun and very soon Jerry did come back to them.

"Doc killed him," he said sternly. "Yet your honor is safe, señor. You did all that you promised, all that you could do. For you could have no suspicion that Doc, wily old boy that he is, was patrolling the premises and meant to do so all night. He had it in his mind that, with so much money in the house, we still ran a lively chance of hearing from the Empire."

"I am glad that it was not you—that it was not at your hand," murmured the white-faced girl.

"Doc loved my dad," said Jerry simply. "Yes, it was best that way."

ELMER had come running, excitedly demanding all particulars; before he could be fully satisfied Uncle Doctor jerked open the front door and stood looking at them with a curious expression stamped on his face.

"My man's got away," he said sharply. When they stared at him, naturally misunderstanding, he added curtly, "No, not El Bravo. I'm talkin' about that other jasper I had shut up in the grain house. Red Handsome." His brows corrugated angrily. "While we were away tonight, down to the Empire, some low-lifed varmint went and pried the padlock off and let him loose! Anyway, he's clean gone. But when I get my two hands on that scaly scoundrel that set him free, there's goin' to be a new hide nailed to my barn door! Of all the——"

"Uncle Doctor!" said Beryl.

"Now, Miss Beryl! I've been mindful you was present, and so I haven't said one half of what I meant! When I used a nice little parlor word like scaly——"

"I let him go," confessed Beryl and in such tones that confession became defiance. "By this time he is very far away, and we will never see him again."

"You! You let that polecat go!"

"Good thing, too," said Jerry promptly, and Beryl flashed him a look full of gratitude. "He can't take anything with him, neither the Alamo Springs ranch nor yet whatever funds and securities he has in the San Juan Bank; we'll have those tied up before he could move a hand toward them. Besides, he wouldn't dare; as Beryl says, he'll be a long way from here by now."

Beryl went to Uncle Doctor and put her two hands on his shoulders.

"Please, Uncle Doctor! I don't want—you know—that barn door of yours!"

"Shucks!" he said. He stood looking at her as though groping for further words, and added, "Shucks!" Then he patted her hands and turned to go. Over his shoulder he said, "I'll have a man in San Juan by sunup with word to old Judge Colter and the district attorney and the bank. 'Night, folks. You can sleep safe, Miss Beryl; I'll forgive you this time."

All this while the old Spaniard had stood blank-faced and motionless. Now a shadowy hint of a smile played about his sensitive lips.

"Señor Elmer," he said graciously, "shall we, just you and I, go into the little room where you were—where the round table is so handy and the cards are? We all grow nicely into the habit of going without sleep, no? Perhaps if we amused ourselves—you suggested, I believe, that even two-handed poker——?"

Blodgett brightened, allowed Costa to lead the way, closed one eye craftily for Jerry's edification and followed his host, softly whistling "The Spanish Cavalier."

AS FOR Jerry and Beryl, they slowly gravitated to a deep, cushiony window seat. To be sure this was their second night without sleep. But Beryl's eyes

were inordinately bright and lovely, the soft flush had returned to her cheeks and she seemed absolutely to thrive on continued staying wide awake, while to Jerry it seemed a crime for a man to lose a single delicious moment of life in the silly unconsciousness of slumber. But a little later, perhaps a couple of hours after that little game of poker started just for fun, when Elmer came into the room he saw that Beryl's head was nodding so that a pink earring seemed to rest on Jerry's shoulder.

"Ahem!" said Elmer Blodgett. "I—I just stepped in," he continued hastily, growing apologetic as two pairs of eyes regarded him curiously quite as though two richly contented young people wondered who he was and whence he came and why. "I—I just stepped in, you know, Jerry, to see if you could lend me some money? I didn't want to butt in, you know, but—things haven't gone so well with me. Don Antonio has sure had a run of luck tonight! But if I——"

Jerry continued to look at him as though still in doubt whether the man was real or merely an unwelcome vision. Elmer shifted and snorted and finally muttered, "Sure, that's all right!" and oozed out. By the time he reached the door he was whistling again—though downright dolefully now—"The Spanish Cavalier."

Beryl sighed.

"I wonder who is winning in there?" she said dreamily.

"Oh!" said Jerry. "That's so; those two are playing cards, aren't they? I don't know why they have to interrupt us so often, do you? There is so much we have to tell each other——"

But then, another way of looking at it was that they had all the rest of their lives in which to get so many important things said. Just now it was imperative for Jerry to tell her about her eyes.

THE END

MYSTERIOUS EASTER ISLAND

M. D. McCarty

EASTER ISLAND lies about two thousand miles from the South American coast, the nearest islands west of it being the Tuamotu group in the Pacific. It is situated in the sub-tropics, has a mild climate with a steady wind blowing all the time, stretches out to an area of about fifty square miles, and is of volcanic origin. Ramo Raraku is the volcano lying in the east part of the island and it contains a crater lake. Easter Island is infested with insects the same as other tropical islands.

In the year 1722, it was discovered by a Dutchman by name of Roggeveen on Easter day. However, at the present time the island is only inhabited by two hundred natives living in a village called Hanga Roa. They care for the live stock grazing on the island which now belongs to Chili, and which is managed by a white man.

On the island stand numerous statues and images of people, the structures ranging up to sixty feet in height, which were built by a race entirely unknown to the present inhabitants. This race had considerable intelligence as its members converted the whole side of a volcano into curious images, carved out of crater ash, some standing on bases weighing as much as thirty tons. How they managed to move and place these statues remains a mystery to every one, as trees are not grown on the island, nor is there much other vegetation.

It is believed that a race occupied this strange island a thousand years before the Polynesians took possession. Numerous chambers and ledges have been located on the grassy slopes of the Rano Raraku showing many uncompleted statues, while others stood in ruins and were weather beaten. Whether a massacre had taken place at one time or tribal warfare had destroyed and wiped out the whole race remains a mystery.

The tattoo artist spins a yarn.

CHERUBS ON THE BEACH

By FRANK J. LEAHY

Author of "Passage to Calicut," "The Black Sheep Laughs," etc.

A MAN'S always more or less of a fool," said I. "But he's many kinds of a fool when he gets so mentally defunct as to allow himself to be disfigured with all or any part of that unsightly junk."

"Spanker-gaff," Baggs snapped off the current of his electric needle and straightened on his stool to burn me with a kind of a look. I'd invaded his hole-in-the-wall of a waterfront tattooing parlor only because my friend, Joe Dudley, after a couple of potent jolts "just off the boat," had decided that he was in love with a dame called Arabella, and that he could do no less to prove it to her than to have said appellation tattooed on his brawny forearm. I'd tried to dissuade him, but no use. He led me to Spanker-gaff Baggs' place and, once there, he'd decided, upon studying the photographic gallery of grotesque torsos, coiled snakes, flower pots, coats-of-arms, nude girls, anchors and what-not, that Arabella should be inscribed on a flaunting banner in the hands of a cherub.

Imagine it! Joe Dudley, with a map that would stop an eight-day bicycle race, calling for a cherub!

"An unmitigated fool!" I raved. "No less."

Spanker-gaff Baggs spat contemptuously.

"Ah, you!" he snorted. "It's people like you that make business so damn' rotten. You don't appreciate art."

I jabbed a finger at the completed out-

line needled in Joe Dudley's arm.

"Art!" I sneered. "Art and a cherub! Arabella alone would be bad enough—but a cherub! Of all things!"

I was about half braced to take one on the chin from Spanker-gaff Baggs—an ex-everything from waterside evangelist to beachcomber—when all of a sudden he burst into a laugh that could be heard from the Ferry Building half way to Pier 42.

"Your uninvited criticism of art is an insult to an artist," he said finally. "But your sardonic reference to a cherub reminds me of something that happened to me'n Handsome Harry Kunkel down on the east coast of Borneo one time when I'd abandoned art temporarily to drill oil wells for a Dutch producing company. I'll tell you about it."

Spanker-gaff Baggs wiped his needle with a dirty rag and tilted himself back against the ink-spattered wall.

PASIR PUTIH, he went on, was the name o' the place, and Rotterdamsche Petroleum Maatschappy was the title o' the company. Put them both in the same picture and you have a bamboo landing sprawling down fifty yards of mud flats, a couple of galvanized-iron godowns, a clutter of thatched native structures of woven bamboo, and beyond all that a malarial jungle. The chief of the field was named Mynheer van Voorabeek Hoogstra, a fat Dutchman who swilled in Rhum Nigrita and made of himself a committee of one to always greet anybody who came on shore from the rusty, little, old inter-island packet whenever it called, which was seldom.

The mention of which packet leads up to the arrival in Pasir Putih one day of Handsome Harry Kunkel, the finest physical specimen of shiftless humanity that ever combed a beach or his curly hair in the middle.

I say Handsome arrived in Pasir Putih. Which he did. But not to the tune of ticker tape nor to the knowledge of Mynheer van Voorabeek Hoogstra. He'd stowed away in the packet, he told me, to avoid being deported from Sandakan for lack of means of visible support. Having been in such embarrassing circumstances myself upon various and nondescript occasions, I took him under my wing, episodically speaking, and quartered him in my shack for to engage him in companionship and white man's conversation.

MY LIQUOR and hospitality held out for two weeks, and then both showed symptoms of having been imposed upon. Handsome Harry Kunkel was fair enough to gaze on in grabs and snatches, but as a regular dose his inordinate thirst and disusefulness overshadowed his physiognomy. I was just about to turn him loose on the Dutch government again when, however and incidentally, something turned up to give me food for thought.

A corked bottle was washed up on the beach, found by a native fisherman, and handed over to Mynheer van Voorabeek Hoogstra. In it was ten grand in U. S. currency and words to the effect that the writer was adrift in a battered long boat which had been launched somewhere off the east coast of Borneo from his sinking barque, the *Susan Hedvig*. Further detail appealed to the honesty of the bottle's finder—a request that the contents be sent to one Enoch Stong who, when both were youths, had, with the writer, by the same needle, been tattooed across the chest with the cherubim and across the back with the seraphim.

That and a few other cogitations of the past and an expression of lost hope for the future were dated six weeks previous and signed by Captain Zachary Hack.

I asked Mynheer van Voorabeek Hoogstra with a sly-fox kind of a wink what he meant to do about it.

"Mister Baggs!" says he with a typical Rhum Nigrita hiccup, "de Rotterdamsche Petroleum Maatschappy iss in Pasir Putih de government, en I am de trusted chief

en an honest man. De money shall be mailed to dis Enoch Stong when de packet call again. Dat iss all you need to know."

"It is," says I. "And I'm glad to be laboring under the impressions of a man of your scrupulosity."

That night, however, I fell to doing a little extra thinking along the lines of art and artifice. Which is to say, I decided that Handsome Harry Kunkel, whether he knew it or liked it or not, was Captain Zachary Hack of he'd find a new boarding house.

Of course, never having seen Zachary Hack in the flesh and bone, I was unaware of his complexion and chest expansion. But, being an artist as well as an oil driller, my imagination informed me that Handsome Harry Kunkel was his mirrored image. And even if Zachary Hack had been a little fat man with a bald head and a lisp, Mynheer van Voorabeek Hoogstra, holder of the stakes, didn't know that—not any more than he knew of the existence or whereabouts of Handsome Harry. It was a case of any port in a storm, and if I passed up this golden opportunity to rescue that ten grand jetsam from that rum-dumb Dutch Hollander I was no longer fit to associate with Art.

Naturally, that was a far cry for the manipulation of my tattooing ability and apparatus, and for Handsome's unargumentative submission to both. It was to be no small task to needle a flock of cherubs all over his chest, and seraphs all over his back, but in such a manner had Captain Zachary Hack been engraved, according to his own bottled mention of the cherubim and seraphim, and so, then, must be Handsome Harry Kunkel.

I shook and kicked him out of a tropic midnight stupor to tell him so.

"Oh, go drill an oil well," says he, "and quit disturbing the peace."

"Rouse out!" says I. "I'll load you up with the cherubim first. And we've got no time to lose."

Which was too true to be convenient. The last time the packet had called was when it had unconsciously siphoned Handsome from its bilges. It was due back now any day or week, and such imminence of failure demanded the burning of midnight oil to overrule my victim's objections and outwit my chief's plans and specifications.

SO I went to work. Ha! Talk about an artist spoiling a perfectly good canvas with a lot of paint! I straddled Handsome Harry Kunkel on my bunk, put a bottle of Capri where he could reach it at frequent intervals, and began to ruin as manly an expansion of untatooed bosom as ever flinched under a needle. It was tough going at first, what with Handsome writhing in agony and me trying to keep him quiet. My shack was somewhat segregated up a path and down the coast from Pasir Putih's rialto and such, but I had visions of being accused of mayhem if the complaints of my manufactured Zachary Hack emanated to disturb the unsuspecting populace.

After a while, however, Handsome had bitten well into the Capri and went dead to the world. It was easier after that for art, and when came the dawn I had his chest covered with as bold a display of cherubs as ever took to flight here or hereafter.

Before I forsook my India ink for Dutch petroleum that day, I aroused my canvas to inquire what he thought of himself under cherubic accompaniment. For a minute after he realized what I'd done to him, I thought I was doomed to be a sacrifice to Art, but he was pretty shaky and sore, and I finally worked in a peace offering of a fresh bottle.

"Consider yourself Captain Zachary Hack from now on," says I. "At least

half of him. Tonight I'll pile the seraphim on your shoulders."

"It's an outrage!" says he. "I'm a marked man!"

"You certainly are," says I. "So marked that Mynheer van Voorabeek Hoogstra will save postage by handing over to you ten thousand negotiable shoe-tongues, and no questions asked."

"Well, it's worth it," says he. "And it ain't half enough."

"My fee," says I, fixing him with a mercenary glance, "will be half the aforestated amount. An artist, after all, must live."

THAT night I clamped the now Not-so-handsome Harry Kunkel between my knees and began tattooing his back with the seraphim.

"What gets me," says he when once I hesitated to muse upon his darkening epidermis, "is what difference there is between this so-called cherry-bum and celery-fin."

"And what gets me," says I, "is what makes you so ignorant in matters above the plane of a burrowing worm. I've heard of beautiful but dumb women, but I hadn't thought the peculiarity had reached down to your lower stratum of society. It's apparent," says I, "that you're nothing but an odd phenomenon."

"Don't beat about the bush," says Handsome. "If you don't know the difference, admit it."

"An artist," says I, shooting my cuff, "knows by intuition every genus of beasts from beachcombers up to lizards. If your beauty could be converted into a pony of gray matter," says I, "I wouldn't have to tell you that a cherub is an angelic being of the celestial hierarchy, and that a seraph is of an even loftier order by a margin of two polled votes and a couple of hash-marks. See?"

"Well," he argues, "how do I know?"

"You'll know," says I, "when I get finished with you. You'll feel a more sanctified expression on your back than on your front. Now pipe down!"

And I jabbed my needle into his verterbrae.

IT TOOK me all night to do that seraphim to my satisfaction and Handsome's disgust. I'd used up all my ink, broken a couple of needles in him, and reduced him from some species of a Greek Adonis to some species of a sideshow monstrosity.

"Zachary Hack, alias Handsome Harry," says I to him, "you don't know how swell you feel."

Swell was right! He was so swollen fore and aft he almost had to use a shoehorn to get into his shirt. For three days he had to just sit, day and night. And for a week thereafter he had to just scratch, day and night. And, by that time, the cherubs and seraphs began shedding their scales for to wing forth to sing a song of shipwreck for ten grand. Each day I watched the cherubim and seraphim develop into Handsome Harry Kunkel's bright and healthy children, so to speak; and each day I watched, like a sailor's sweetheart, for the coming of the packet. Those tattooes had to be well and of apparent ancient vintage before she showed up or Mynheer van Voorabeek Hoogstra might sneer at modern art and mail the money to Enoch Stong in spite of our pains, plans and pigments.

But, as the saying goes, nature beat the packet, art triumphed over time, and Handsome Harry Kunkel was at long last in condition to turn up and demand the contents of a bottle that, for once, couldn't be ingurgitated.

"Let's go," says I, "while yet we may."

He didn't need any false face or stage clothes to make him look like a shipwrecked sailor. He was bewhiskered and tattered and torn when he'd landed in Pasir Putih, and he was twice that now, with exclamation marks.

"What's that funny smell?" he asks the minute we steal forth into the night.

"That's fresh air, you sapadillo!" says I. "You've been so long under bottle

and key you don't recognize an odor from a smell."

To do the thing up right, I figured that this protégé of mine was only a hypothetical Zachary Hack if he put in his appearance from any other than the sea-going angle of the landscape. If he was found, tattooed and tattered somewhere offshore, who was there, including myself, to dispute the facts and configurations?

So I smuggled us into a temporarily unoccupied tambangan—a kind of a cranky native boat with a kind of a thatched shelter 'midships—and paddled it away from the beach till we got enough wind to hoist the sail. I took the tiller, and Handsome, ever true to form, laid down under the thatch and proceeded to sleep.

WHILE Pasir Putih was fading out in the starlight, I got to wondering if I wasn't about to speak evil of the dead by forging Handsome Harry Kunkel off as a man who'd never done me any harm nor harmfulness. Captain Zachary Hack, it stood to bottled reason, had had more gumption in the little toe of one of his cherubs than Handsome had in his whole cherubim. Such compunctions of unconsciousness so worked me into a lather that I put up the tiller at the end of my patience and planted a lusty kick in the snoozer's seraphim to snap him into the situation.

"It looks to me," says I, "that there's enough remuneration hanging over your head to keep you in wakefulness for a week. Pile out!"

"Where am I?" he asks.

"You're at the point of disembarkation," says I, "according to the chronometer and all the lunar transits. The tide's right to push you towards shore, and you should be picked up by the early morning fishermen somewhere adjacent to the crack o' dawn. Now scram, Captain Zachary Hack," says I, "and don't forget all the facts misleading up to your identity."

WELL, give him credit, Handsome was game at the crucial moment. He climbed over the side and I handed him the stout piece of driftwood we'd brought along from the beach. Then I worked the tambangan about and made back for Pasir Putih.

Now, things happen so infrequent along that section of the Borneo seaboard that anything from a blessed event to the arrival of the packet is cause for the declaration of a legal holiday. The finding of the pseudo-Zachary Hack the next morning after breakfast increased the number of cases of heart-trouble-from-startling-causes, I think, by seventy-six percent. He was brought on shore from a fantistically carved fishing boat—wet, ragged, bewhiskered, tattooed and handsome—and laid on the beach sand by a swelling throng.

I was right there with the rest, for who was I to scorn this man who was, at the moment, of greater moment than the Rotterdamsche Petroleum Maatschappy itself? I exercised a white man's privilege by shouldering way to the forefront for to see and behold, among other things, what damage Handsome Harry Kunkel had endured during the night. But I saw that the bath seemed to have done him good, and that he looked almost too well-fed and liquored to be true.

He deliberately winked at me, and I scowled him back into his given rôle in return.

"Can it be," says I, kneeling down beside him, "that this is Zachary Hack of the lost barque, *Susan Hedvig?*"

"It can," Handsome makes ready repartee, "and I can prove it."

"Shut up, you dumbkopf!" I snarled for his sole benefit. "I'll do the talking."

About that time Mynheer van Voorabeek Hoogstra comes lumbering down from his white-painted bungalow. He was bleary-eyed, bloated and perspiring from a recent go with Rhum Nigrita, and when he came alongside the center of the excitement he had to mop his face through a full minute of puffing cogitation before he reached sight of the fact that this here shabby stranger feller was who he was—or wasn't.

"Donders!" says he.

"Nope," says I. "Guess again, Mr. Hoogstra. This is Captain Zachary Hack whose dying words and money you've got locked in your safe. Look at that cherubim on his chest!"

"Donders!" grunts Mynheer van Voorabeek Hoogstra again. "Iss it possible?"

"Well, hell!" blurts Handsome, impatient, "if you want further proof, look down my back and you'll see the Sarah Finn, too."

"Silence!" I snarled at him, and finished by addressing Hoogstra—"silence has lasted all these weeks, and now the lost sheep has returned to the fold."

"En yust at dis time en hour, too!" says Mynheer van Dutchman, squinting seaward and pointing. "Look! Here comes de packet, en in her I wass going to send de money away. It iss most coincidental."

"As well as congenial," says I, "for all intents and purposes. This here Captain Zachary Hack seems to be pretty well physically and financially shot from his experience and I s'pose he'll want to leave in the packet for shores more conducive to recuperation from harrowing thought and so on."

"Take him up to mine house," says Mynheer, his further attention diverting itself to the approaching packet. "He, perhaps, iss pretty hungry for food."

"And thirsty for drink," says I.

"I shall wait for de packet," says he, "en see if maybe somebody come on business."

SO I oversee Handsome Harry Kunkel's transfer to the chief's bungalow, and there I dispense with the innocent bystanders.

"Well," says I to him, "things look favorable, hah?"

"Maybe things do," says Handsome, "but I don't. These beasts flying all over me give me the creeps."

"Don't be so sacrilegious," says I. "Besides, you ought to be glad those cherubs and seraphs ain't snakes and spiders."

Well, we paw dirt and watch through a window to see the packet come to anchor. About then, Handsome spots a bottle of Rhum Nigrita, and I have to wrestle it away from him before he swallows label and all.

"You unenthusiastic ghost of a shipwrecked mariner!" says I. "Why can't you control your bestial immoderations till we get our money back? Sit down and look desolated," says I all of a sudden. "Here comes the chief now, and he's got somebody with him."

Mynheer van Voorabeek Hoogstra had in tow a being who was full of height and breadth and seamanly indications; a man who wore close-cropped whiskers and a frown and brass-buttoned serge. I looked at him and I looked at the chief and I looked at Handsome and I looked for the nearest avenue of escape.

"Please to sit down, Captain Hack," says Mynheer.

"I am sittin' down," says Handsome, speaking up. "What more do you want?"

"You!" snorts van Voorabeek. "Verdomme! You! You imposter!"

Handsome shot me a look full of appeal for moral assistance, and I rose to the occasion with an assumption of nonchalance.

"Mynheer van Voorabeek Hoogstra," says I, "you're the big shot around this Rotterdamsche Petroleum Maatschappy, a good fellow and an excellent judge of rum, but ain't you misapplying your attributes by calling this poor man names and

insinuations? Not that it means anything to me," says I, "but man's inhumanity to man ofttimes makes even a lowly oil driller see red."

"Please to shut up, you!" says Hoogstra. "Dere iss no use for you to talk. Dis man come in de packet iss Captain Zachary Hack. Already he hass told me he wass rescued after his boat had gone to pieces and his bottle had gone adrift; dat he wass taken to Singapore in de rescue ship, and dat he hass come for de money which he hope must haff been cast up on dese shores. So dere iss no use for you to talk. Dere cannot be two Zachary Hacks."

"I'll say there can't," says I, playing my last card. "My man's the guaranteed goods, sealed, labeled and stamped with a trademark to defy all imitators. Let your wolf in sheep's clothing show a tattooed plurality of cherubs and seraphs, fore and aft. Just let him," says I, as if the whole Dutch government could prevent it, "just let him!"

There was a growl from the brass-buttoned Zachary as he tore with horny hands at his shirt-front.

"Cherries and sheriffs, is it?" he roars. "I'll show you better than that. I'll show you the hair-grown pictures of the Cherubim and the Seraphim—two of the prettiest full-rigged clipper ships that ever sailed the high seas."

"Ships!" says I. "Well, why in hell didn't you say that in the bottle?"

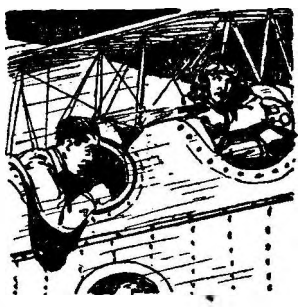
SPANKER-GAFF BAGGS gave vent to another laugh, hitched his stool closer to Joe Dudley and snapped on the current of his electric needle.

"What happened then?" I asked.

"Oh, nothing much," he said, dipping his needle into a cracked bowl of blue dye and gripping Joe's bared arm. "This nose o' mine, though—have you noticed it? Reminds you of a broken spanker-gaff, don't it? Well, it pains me to admit that Handsome Harry Kunkel twisted it into that shape. Which shows how some people appreciate art."

In the next issue

MURDER IN THE AIR



A novelette of a mystery of the hazardous air-ways

by

Eustace L. Adams

PERFORMANCE BY COMMAND

By
WILLIAM FREEMAN HOUGH

"Find them broncs pronto or else——"

JUST why they called that pardner of mine "Pink" Tingley is more than I know. It ought to of been "Red" Tingley, 'cause his hair was so red it looked like it was on fire. At any rate, whether from fire or somethin' else, his brain had been scorched. His nose was just a button set square in the center of a map of freckles; an' when that nose began to twitch an' bob, you could figure that Pink was workin' his pint sized brain into a spasm. In the course of an hour or two he'd give birth to an idea which generally wasn't worth the struggle.

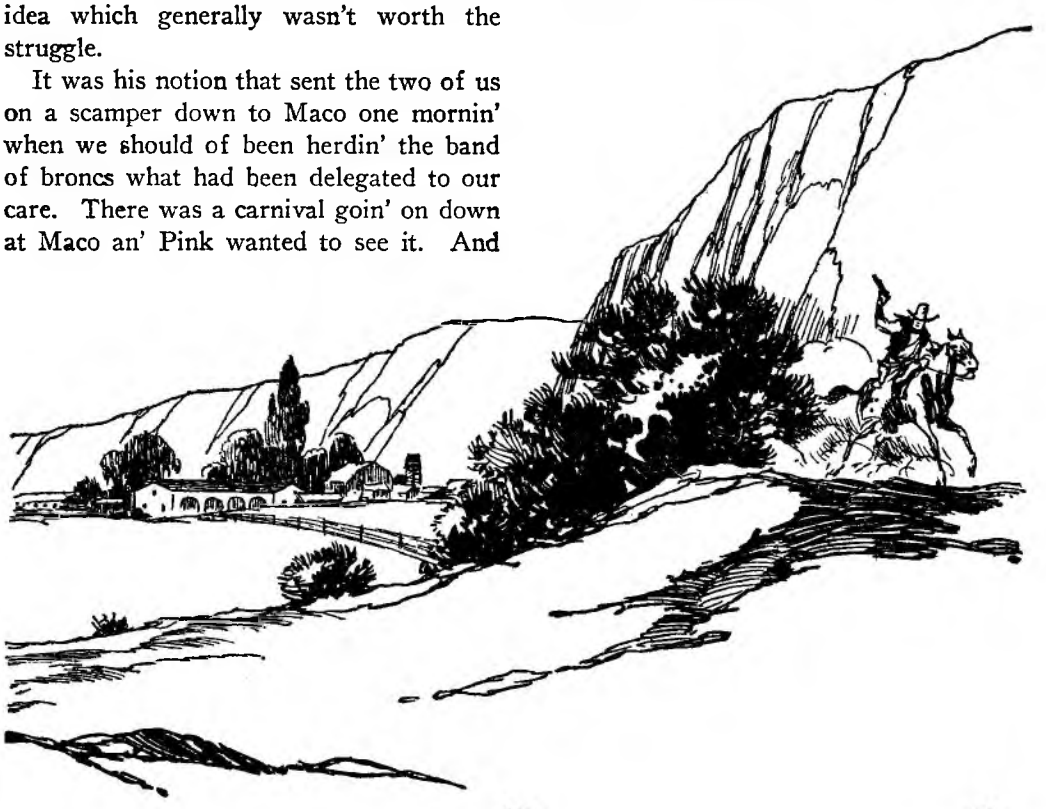
It was his notion that sent the two of us on a scamper down to Maco one mornin' when we should of been herdin' the band of broncs what had been delegated to our care. There was a carnival goin' on down at Maco an' Pink wanted to see it. And when we got back to the camp soon after sundown, we had no hosses.

"S'funny," says Pink scratchin' his fiery dome. "We left 'em right in this little valley."

"In which I don't agree with you that it's so amusin'," I returns. "We got to find them broncs pronto or else."

"Or else what?" he wants to know. Pink is stupid that way. In fac' he ain't had no education to speak of.

"Or else we got to get skinned alive by one Ben V. Derringer," I says. "An' Ben



is one of the best skinners in these parts. An' all because you wanted to see a fat lady in a sideshow."

"She had a nice face," he ruminates. "I'll never understand why she married the human skeleton."

"Figured he'd make a rattlin' good husband, likely," says I. "Which same ain't got nothin' to do with a band of lost geldin's. Get yourself aroun' one of them cold biscuits an' then we'll start huntin'."

You might as well know that me'n Pink worked on the biggest hoss ranch in southern Arizona. Ben V. Derringer owned the spread, runnin' close to a thousand head of broncs on his range. These broncs run all the way from broomtails up to real blooded stuff.

Only lately he'd decided to separate the better grades, figurin' not to contaminate his racers with lower grades. So it was that me'n Pink is given a bunch of some twenty nice geldin's to herd over on a west section of the ranch. We should of been right happy on account we was handed the job of chaperoonin' elite hoss flesh; but after a week in the camp Pink had got restive. The geldin's were peaceful enough, feedin' easy along the slopes. So Pink 'lowed that leavin' 'em alone for a day wouldn't hurt nothin'. But now they were gone.

WELL, we hunts all night. Come daylight we've combed all the ridges an' valleys in our section. Me, I begun to feel cold chills runnin' up my back. If them hosses has been stolen it's just too bad—for us. I cussed myself for ever listenin' to Pink's sireen call about the carnival.

At noon we rides into the home ranch to report. Folks, I can still feel Ben Derringer's cold eyes borin' right through my middle. He listens to us for a time, lettin' us wander aroun' huntin' for excuses; then he says, "Saddle up your own broncs, men."

"Now, listen, Ben—" I begs.

"Your own horses," he snaps. "You're going hunting for those geldings. Take your own broncs because if you don't find the band you'll keep right on going."

"I know you set great store by them hosses," I says. "We're sorry——"

"Sorry!" he snorts. "You talk like a kid instead of a horse wrangler. Let the best bunch of two-year-olds in the country get away from you and then say you're sorry. Get out! Move! Vamoose!"

An' that's how the whole thing started. What happened to me'n Pink was plenty.

After two long days of combin' the draws an' valleys west of the main ranch, we pulls into Maco for somethin' to eat. A man can go just so long without his beans, y'know. I felt myself gettin' testier every day, an' knew that if I got much hungrier I'd likely massacre that red headed boob what I had for a pardner. It was all his fault anyhow.

It bein' Saturday when we arrives, the town is cluttered up with folks what's come in for a last shot at the carnival. The main street is lined on both sides with shows, hot dog stands an' the like. You know how them carnivals are. So I takes our two broncs down a side street, tellin' Pink to locate a good eatin' place while I 'tended to our steeds. I suggested that he ask all an' sundry if they'd seen the stock we was lookin' for. No tellin' but what some rancher had seen them geldin's.

I was down to the livery barn mebbe half an hour, after which I goes up town to join Pink in a meal. Do you know what that half baked pard of mine had done? He'd went into some joint what furnished near beer what wasn't so near, an' laid in a plum ample foundation of suds on a empty stomach. When I found him, he was settin' on a stool in a restaurant, inhalin' a million beans an' starin' glass eyed at a gum-chewin' waitress.

"What do you think, Ed," he says, rollin' his orbs at me as I come in. "This here ma'am ain't never heard of the B. V. D. brand."

"It ain't on the menu, is it?" she says smackin' her gum an' shiftin' her hips.

"B. V. D. sound like underwear t'me."

"Underwear!" gulps Pink coughin' a bean off a tonsil.

The girl shoots a glance at me. "Your frien' is talkin' like a baby," she says. "Mumbles about B. V. D's, all the time. I'll bring him a bowl of alphabet soup, but he'll have to pick his own letters out of it."

"Never mind," says I. "He's talkin' about a brand. A horse brand."

"Horse feathers," she sniffs an' walks away.

"Finish them beans an' let's get out of here," I snaps. "You're a sight. Dust an' sweat outside; beans an' beer inside. It's gettin' so a fella can't trust you a foot out of his sight."

"Ain'tcha goin' to eat?" he asks, speakin' slow an' distinct as he always does when he's half crocked.

"After I put you to bed in the livery barn," I says. "I want to be alone with my food. I want to think, to cogitate on this here calamity what's overcome us. I longs to commune with reason onct, an' do so unhampered by any red topped candidate for a state institution."

I always unleash my education that way when I'm mad. It serves to awe Pink into a state of coma, sort of. Me spillin' big words sets him back on his hocks, so's to speak.

"Al-l-l-l right," he mutters slidin' down off'n the stool. "If that's the way you feel about it."

I GUIDED him out of the eatin' horspital an' into the street. At that moment Maco was a bedlam, no less; more noises an' smells than a stockyard. Everywhere you looked was banners depictin' the sights seen inside the shows. Right acrost from us a hooch dancer was twistin' plum frantic. Further down a snake charmer was playin' with a coupla reptiles. On beyond this was the freak show, with the skeleton gent, his fat wife, the strong man an' a sword swallower. Pink got one whiff of them smells, rolled his eyes over the street and balked.

I'd of saved us both a heap of trouble if I'd of knocked him cold right then. As it was, I agreed to passin' down the street on the way to the barn. So, arm in arm, we t o d d l e s along through the dust, m a k i n' fair headway until we c o m e to a taffy stand. Here Pink braced his hind legs long 'nough to buy a handful of sticky taffy, which same is smeared all over his freckled map in about two minutes.

We gets goin' again. Does right fair till he decides on some peanuts. After this comes a couple of hot dogs dressed in mustard. Then a ice cream cone covers his button nose an' leaks down the alley which has so far entertained beer, beans, candy, peanuts.

"How'd it be if I rustled you a dill pickle?" I asks him sarcastic.

"Gimme time," he gurgles. "I ain't aimin' to miss any of it."

Onct he got kinda wobbly, an' I braced him up against a plank wall. I didn't know them planks was the side of a tank filled with water. Whilst we're standin' there, a high diver flops off a ladder overhead an' smacks into the tank. Me'n Pink is soaked from head to foot by the slopover.

Pink shakes his head an' wipes his mouth. "Ed," says he, "here's somethin' for your huge eddication. Did you know that they ain't but three feet of water in this here tank? Think of divin' into that from a high ladder!"

"You wouldn't want the diver to drown, would you?" I comes back.

He kinda hiccups an' says, "Never thought of that, Ed."

WE MADE fair headway then until we come to a couple of gents havin' a argument 'bout somethin'. We couldn't hear what it was about on account of a gasoline engine poppin' nearby. One of

the fellas was dressed in greasy overalls an' was chewin' terbacco. I'd seen him before, runnin' the engine what was attached to a cable. The cable was fastened to the bottom of a basket an' the basket was fastened on to a big balloon which was swayin' back an' forth overhead.

I was hopin' that Pink wouldn't notice that big balloon, but he did. Turnin' from the two men what was fussin', he rocks back on his heels an' gaps at the big bag. Purty soon I see his button nose begin to twitch an' knew he was lost. He breaks away from me an' staggers up to the machine man.

"How much for a ride in the heavenly chariot?" he asks.

"Five bucks a journey," says the gent out of the corner of his mouth. He's keepin' his eyes on the gent in front of him.

"Come on, Pink," I begs. "Don't figure on the balloon t'day."

"Ed," he mutters, "I'm feelin' kinda low. I need to git up a ways." He rustles aroun' in his pants till he finds a bill—five dollars. "Here y'are," he says passin' it to the machine-man.

The balloon tender looks Pink over. "I dunno," he says kinda doubtful. "You're sort of organized, brother. You might fall out up there."

"What for?" asks Pink.

"You'd better go along with him," says the man to me.

"Not at five bucks a crack," I snorts.

"I tell you what. Business has been rotten t'day. I'll let you both go for the price of one. But you, Mister," pointin' at me, "will hafta be responsible for this frien' of yours."

"Aw, come on, Ed," begs Pink.

"Will you go to bed when we come down?"

"Sure thing I will. That's a promise."

"All right," I sighs. "Let's get goin'."

"'Scuse me," says the balloon man to the gent he's been arguin' with. "I'll finish with you just as soon as I 'tend to business."

The cable fastened to the balloon basket wasn't no bigger'n my little finger, which same worried me some as I helped Pink get up a long ladder what stood beside the winch. Said cable was wound around an iron drum, the end stuck in a hole in same. The drum was controlled by a brake shoe with a lever on it.

"Listen, Pink," says I. "Are you right sure you want to do this?" But just then Pink tumbles over the side of the basket an' sprawls on the floor of it. I takes a last look at the ground an' throws a leg inside. "Take it easy, brother," I calls to the man below.

"Sure," he calls up. "I'll just let you go up about four hundred. That's safe enough with no wind blowin'."

In a coupla minutes Pink gets hisself untangled an' stands up in the basket. "What's the delay?" he wants to know. "Why don't we start?"

"If you'll look over the side," I tells him, "you'll see that the topography of this here country is changin' right fast." We was up anyhow a hundred feet by that time.

"Hey!" yells Pink. "Fight! Fight! Look, Ed."

I PEERS down. Sure enough there's a fight goin' right beneath us. The balloon man has tangled with the other gent. The cable drum is whizzin' aroun' so fast it's just a blur.

"I don't think that buzzard should of took his hand from the brake lever," I mutters.

"Gosh, they're gettin' kinda small," says Pink rubbin' his eyes. "Are we still goin' up, Ed?"

"And how!"

"Well, mebbe we should tell him to stop us."

"You try it," I snorts.

Pink puts his chin over the edge of the basket, opens his mouth to beller an' likes to get his tongue cut off. We got a jolt what rocked the whole balloon. He blinks rapid. "What was that?"

"We reached the end of the cable," I guesses.

"Then we stopped goin' up?"

"I'm full of hopes thataway."

"You look an' see, Ed. Somehow my chin don't fit over the edge."

I looked. Shades of piebald Pete! All I could see of Maco was a little cluster of buildin's with a few ants runnin' aroun'. An' while I watched even this disappeared. We hadn't stopped whatever. The end of the cable must of pulled right out of the hole in the drum. I topples back in the basket an' stares up at the big bag overhead.

"Ed," says Pink, "you was right. I ought to of put this trip off a day." He feels of his throat an' gulps. "I reckon they'd better pull us back down."

"We're past all human aid, Pink," I tells him in a hollow voice.

"What you mean?"

"We're loose—on the drift—goin' up."

"Loose?" He flops to the edge of the basket an' looks down. The squeal he let out give me the shivers. "Can't see the ground, Ed. Just a haze—like heat waves. Oh, what'll we do?"

"Wait till we get a little closer to God an' then pray," says I wettin' my lips. "Mebbe he won't recognize us even then, but anyhow he'll soon have a better chanct to hear us."

By that time we could just see the tops of the surroundin' hills. All the rest was a haze—heat waves sure enough. We didn't seem to be movin', but I wasn't fooled, not for a second. Somewhere I'd read that the hotter the day the higher a balloon went. The heat expanded the gas in the bag, or somethin' like that. An' it was plenty hot that day.

I LOOKED up at the net what went aroun' the fat sides of the gas bag. I'd never noticed until then how dang fragile that net was. I'd sure played the fool, bein' easy with Pink. That buzzard would lead a angel into temptation. Just because I yoomered him a little, he gets us both killed. I begin to get mad. What if we drifts over into Mexico. Maco ain't only about three miles from the line, an' if the wind is in the north . . .

"What you shakin' your head for, Ed?" bleats Pink.

"Tryin' to get the roar out of my ears," I snap at him. "We're gainin' altitude all the time."

"It ain't my head what roars," he whimpers. "My stomach—Ed, I'm sick."

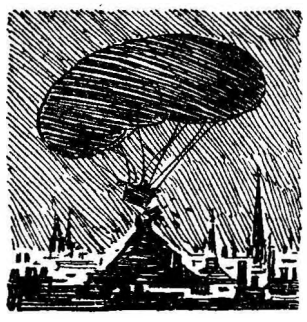
"You an' your beer an' beans," I sneers. "Yeah, an' hot dogs an' candy an' ice cream."

"Don't," he bellers gettin' about the color of a string bean.

"Better not point the load my way," I warns him. "Git to your own side of the basket. Needn't take aim; just let 'er go. You won't hit nothin' but air."

Ten minutes later he's feelin' better, as far as the stomach went. Floppin' down in the basket he closes his eyes an' dang me if he don't go to sleep leavin' me to do all the worryin' alone.

By'n-by we gets higher than the sun, or so it seemed. Then I remembered that like as not the sun was settin'. I don't know how many hours we'd been floatin' aroun', but when I took another look below I could see a dark cloud. It was gettin' late evenin' down on the earth; up where we were it was just sunset.



Pink fin'lly wakes up an' stretches. He shivers some, an' it was then that I noticed it was gettin' cool. An' I was hungry! Remember, I hadn't had nothin' to eat yet.

"I'll bet Ben Derringer will be sorry when he hears about this," is Pink's first words.

"Sorry!" I yodels. "He'll be tickled to death. Good riddance, that's what he'll say. But I ain't worryin' about Ben. I'm

wonderin' whether we'll starve to death or freeze. It gets dang chilly over these deserts at night. What I wouldn't give for a sardine sandwich!"

Pink scrambles to his feet an' leans over the edge of the basket again. "Don't speak of food," he begs.

"It helps me some just to see you sufferin' from the mal de mere," I grunts.

"What ever it is, I'm sufferin'," he chokes.

AN' THEN it got dark, an' cold, an' lonesome. Never a sound, unless Pink groaned. I got so cold I had to stand up an' swing my arms, which same rocked the basket in an alarmin' manner. Fin'lly I got so tired I curled up on the floor an' dropped off to sleep.

I was woke up by Pink shakin' me. The basket is jerkin' an' swayin' scand'lous. Leapin' to my feet I looks aroun' to find that it's just gettin' daylight. An', sweet mercy!, we're only three-four feet off'n the ground. The end of the cable is twistin' along like a snake, snarlin' into cactus an' mesquite. But it don't get a holt permanent. Onct or twice it grips so hard that the balloon tips almost sideways, an' it's then that Pink's freckles get to be white dots.

Well, we skids along that way for a mile or two. I tries to tell Pink that the cold night air has shrunk the gas in the ballon, which has caused us to come down. But Pink is plum paralyzed scared; I might just as well been talkin' to a boulder. I realized, too, that as soon as the sun come up so would we.

Then of a sudden come a harder jerk. I hears a rattle an' crash down below. Peekin' over the side I see the cable snap off the edge of a dobe roof, takin' plenty of hard mud an' dried ocotillo braces with it. The cable coiled up an' then sags again, comin' down right in a street. I hears faint shoutin'. Some men come runnin' outa buildin's wavin' their hands. Purty soon they lays holt of the cable. We sorta sags a bit an' then starts draggin' the men along. More comin' boilin' onto the scene an' presently they get the balloon stopped.

Pink is gurglin' with excitement. Wanderin' hoss wranglers saved from airy death! Mysterious balloon pulled out of the air and two men rescued.

For mebbe fifteen minutes we float there; then slow we start edgin' downward. The men has wrapped the cable aroun' a well windlass at the end of the street an' is grindin' us back to earth. They was all Mexicans I could see, an' every mother's son of 'em had a gun.

I'LL admit I was glad to get down—for a minute. But when I jumped out of that basket it was to find six or seven rifles stuck in my gizzard. Pink got the same reception. A dressed up little Spik carryin' a sword struts up to us an' skins back his lips.

"Espies!" he hisses.

"I'll go you on that," chortles Pink pullin' down a pants' leg. "Make mine apple."

"He ain't talkin' about somethin' to eat," I tells him. "He claims we're spies."

"Oh," mutters Pink. "Spies, eh? No spika da Inglish."

"Gringo spies. We have ketch you."

"Now, listen, Captain," says I. "We ain't spies; we just got turned loose in that balloon by mistake. We can explain all about it."

"Bah!" spits the little gent. "You are agents for those accursed government. But I, Ramón, have ketch you up. To the carcel weeth them, amigos. Viva la revolución."

So with a mess of vivas they shove us down the street an' kick us into a smelly little hut.

"Well," says I turnin' to Pink, "this is worse an' more of it. Look what you got us into. First a cockeyed balloon trip an' then a Spik revolution. Do you know what they'll do to us now?"

"So soon as they've found out they've made a mistake," he says, "they'll turn us loose."

"An' just who is goin' to convince 'em

they've made a mistake?" I comes back. "This is some little town south of the Border what never heard of a telegraft wire. Never get no news or nothin'. They don't know a balloon got loose. They think we're spies from the Mex Government. That means they'll stand us up against some wall an' sling lead at us."

FOR a time we just squats down in that dark little hut an' thinks. We could hear four or five guards marchin' round an' round the place, keepin' a clost watch on two defenseless gringos. Somehow the ol' hoss ranch seemed a long ways off to me right then. And was I hungry!

"Oh, for a hank of hair, a jug of wine an' thou—" I quotes sadly.

"What you talkin' about?" asks Pink.

"That," says I, "is poetry. You wouldn't understand."

"What made you think of it? Goin' cuckoo?"

"My stomach made me think of it," I snaps. "I'm hungry. I could do with a jug of wine an' some beans right now."

"Beans," says Pink wettin' his lips. "There's one fruit I never want to see again."

"Atención!" came a voice outside. The guards stopped marchin'. Then the door opened an' the little banty cock of a captain stuck his head inside. "Be prepare, gringos," he snaps. "Thees trial ees 'bout to take place. Genral Sandello waits. Come weeth me."

"Well, here's where we get final orders," I whispers to Pink. "Shot at sunrise—that's us."

"The sun's already up," he points out.

Down the dusty little street we go entirely surrounded with the dirtiest lookin' bunch of revolutionists you ever saw. They looked mean, did them spiks.

Soon we're herded into another hut before which is two sentries standin' stiff as pokers. Onct inside we're halted. A side door opens an' in waddles the fattest Mex I ever laid eyes on. Pantin' like a wind busted bronc he drops into a chair. He runs us over with his little pig eyes then turns to the banty cock officer.

"Proceed," he says.

The captain turns loose a cloudburst of Mex with gestures. He points at us; he waves his hands; he grabs a gun an' aims it at my wishbone. When he fin'lly subsides he's sweatin' like a cold glass.

"Ees this all true, amigos?" asks the general.

"Search me, Gen," says I. "I never caught a word he said. But if he claims we're spies he lies like a blanket. Here's what happened." An' I tell him the whole sad story from beginnin' to end.

"Too bad," nods General Sandello. "Indeed a sorrowful adventure. Eet ees lucky that we have pull you down, eh?"

"Oh, sure," I agrees feelin' better right off.

"Otherwise you might have been keeled, eh?"

"Sure," says I again.

"Then, so long as we have save the life, do you not owe us sometheeng? But yes. So you weel join the revolution, no? I theenk so. Eet would be too bad to shoot such brave gringos."

I looks at Pink. His Adam's apple is flutterin' up an' down right frantic. I clears my throat.

"Well, Gen," says I, "you kinda got us over a barrel thataway. We ain't got nothin' against the Mex government."

"But I, General Sandello, have been chose to lead my people to liberty," he says thumpin' his fat chest. "We are but poor. We need much to carry on thees fight. So, when two amigos such as you come along, we welcome you."

"I don't like the way he said that," whispers Pink.

"Eet ees said that the Federals are prepare to advance on us here in Los Arias," goes on Sandello. "But we have arrange thees trap, no, Ramón?"

"Seguro," nods the captain.

"As soon as thees enemy have come in sight we make ready. And what way ees better to see the enemy than from high

observation? Eet ees my command that you, amigos, ascend to the air in your balloon to watch for the enemy."

"Bravo!" yells Ramón dancin' on one foot. "Viva revolución."

"Amigos, I am big man. I have many men weeth me. We are prepare for war. An' you shall help us. Ramón, you weel afford thees men with uniforms and make ready the ascent."

"Pink," says I, "if we ever get out of this alive I'm goin' to kill you."

You ought to of seen the uniforms Ramón gave us. I couldn't get into mine.

Too small. But Pink was so scared he wiggled into his smelly outfit. Onct in he didn't dare bend over. If he had, he'd of been settin' right out doors. He wasn't no good imitation of Venus D Milo, you can bet on that.

Well, we gets some breakfast eventual; then Ramón gives us one of them spy glasses an' loads us back in the balloon. Personal, I didn't care whether we stopped at the end of the cable or not. But they had it tied hard an' fast to the ol' windlass.

"I s'pose," says I, onct we're up in the air, "that we'd better watch the south. That's where the Feds will come from. Line them specs on the hills yonder."

"Line hell!" stutters Pink. "I see somethin' a dang sight more interestin' than soldiers. Take a look over that first hill there, back in that little draw. It's hosses."

"Rare an' curious beast in these parts," I yawns.

"Yeah?" says Pink still lookin'. "But it just happens them—let's see—yeah, eighteen of 'em, has the B. V. D. brand burnt on 'em."

"Whom the gods would make mad they first make cockeyed," I grunts.

"Look for yourself," handin' me the glasses.

An' Pink was right. One good look an' I found myself slobberin' like a mad mule. A little runt of a revolution outfit has crossed the Border an' swiped our prize broncs. Of course I settled down to do some steady thinkin' right away. That's just like me, y'know. It gets right plain that we ain't so far from the Border after all; else how could them Derringer hosses be down here so quick. Looks, now, like our balloon had gone about straight up an' come down the same way.

THEM Mex left us up in the air all day without no food or drink. Was we mad? After sunset they hold a parade, yell a lot of vivas an' then subside. Los Arias—which same I don't figure to be the name of the town on account I've never heard of it—wraps itself in smelly slumber an' leaves us gringos up in the air to watch for their mortal enemies.

"I'm goin' down," I tells Pink 'long 'bout ten o'clock. "Even if I have to slide down this here cable."

"An' get yourself mortified into fragments?" he gasps.

"Give me a hand over the edge of this basket," I growls. I reach out an' grab the shrouds what spread up over the balloon. I find one strand what's hangin' loose—the same one what's been danglin' that way all the time. I hadn't spoke to Pink about it 'cause I thought he'd die of fright. But when I sorta puts my weight on that cord, somethin' happens. We hears a hissin' noise.

It turns out there's a valve at the top of the big bag, an' I was pullin' the rope that opened it. Pink hangs onto the basket as we begin to settle down. Seemed as though we was sinkin' right into a dark well. In the course of time the basket squats on the ground an' we crawl out.

Sandello must of been puttin' a lot of faith in us two 'cause they wasn't a soldier around. Pink an' me rustles aroun' that little dump until we finds a coupla broncs tied in a stable, all saddled. I felt down the left hip of 'em an' found the B. V. D. brand.

"Now for home an' country," husks Pink. "Which way do we go?"

"North, after we get our hosses," I grits. "I won't leave these here viva gents get away with our stock. Come on."

There was one sleepy guard at the little corral in the draw. I chokes him down while Pink opens the gate. In no time whatever we're crowdin' them Derringer hosses off toward the north, goin' easy, at the start, so's we won't bring the whole army of mebbe fifty down on our necks. But onct we're started, we lay on the leather. An' did them B. V. D's head for home! They knew where the real feed grew.

ALL night we rode, floggin' along over hill an' dale. Any minute I expected Pink to break out with grand gestures on the way he had come to discover our little band. But Pink was tired an', likely enough, wanted to forget all about balloons an' beer an' beans.

We crossed the Border soon after daylight an' pushed on up toward our own range. It was my pious idee to head straight for the home ranch so's we could show what we'd done. Let 'em laugh at us if they wanted to, but they couldn't discount the fac' that we'd gone into Mexico an' brought back a bunch of stolen hosses. That ain't done every day, not in these parts.

Just as we loped into the home pasture a gent come ridin' out to meet us. It's Pat Hart, the foreman. Circlin' aroun' the band he joins up with us. Pink's chest begun to swell some. I was feelin' sorta puffed up myself. "Howdy, Pat?" I yodels. "Look 'em over."

"I am," he says, a funny look on his face. "Where'd you get these broncs?"

"Across the Border," I triumphs. "They'd been stolen. Can't no Mex run a ranny on me an' Pink thataway."

"Oh, yeah?" says Pat. "Well, you gents has sure raised hell."

"We stop at nothin' when it comes to gettin' back our stock."

"Your stock! Say, you half wit, the bunch you two was supposed to watch is with the main band. When you an' Pink went to Maco, they just drifted back to the north range. Been there ever since."

"What's that?" I bleats. "With the main band? But what about these here?"

Pat Hart bends a pityin' glance at us. "These," he says sorta sarcastic, "was sold to General Sandello ten days ago."

Shades of misery! After all our sufferin' an' labor we'd only ended up by stealin' twenty head of geldin's. I looks at Pink. That red headed mistake is about ready to bust out cryin'. Well, I felt sorta deflated myself.

"It just wasn't in the cards," I mutters. "Didn't seem possible that we two could have enough luck to do the right thing. Onct I thought that hair raisin' trip was plum ordained to a good purpose. I was all wrong. Pink, I guess you an' me might as well be driftin'."

"Not yet you ain't," snaps Pat Hart. "You come up to the ranch with me. Ben Derringer ain't there just at present, but I'm sure he'll want to see you gents when he does come home."

"He needn't figure on me drivin' them geldin's back to Sandello," says I. "I'll go to jail first."

"Me too," Pink echoes.

"Prob'ly be worse than jail," snorts Pat. "Rustlin' stock across the Border is right serious business."

AS WE nears the ranch, a cloud of dust comes rollin' in from the east. Ben V. Derringer leaps out of his car an' comes walkin' toward us. An' is he mad! Man, the sparks was just flyin'. He heads for Pat Hart.

"Dang you, Pat," he thunders. "I didn't

want to sell those geldings to Sandello at all. It was you said to let him have them. Now I'm gypped again."

"Why, what's the trouble, Boss?" asks Pat.

"I took the check Sandello gave me to the bank in Nogales and they refuse to honor it. Say they've had word from the Mexican Government that Sandello has revolted and is gathering an army. So they won't O. K. any checks he's written. Now I'm out those horses."

"S'cuse me, Ben," I butts in, "but will you look out there in the pasture?"

He looks an' his eyes bulge. "Why—why it's the bunch I sold that fat Mex. How'n hell did they get here?"

"These fat heads——" begins Hart.

"You shut up," I tells him. "Ben, it's this way; me'n Pink is roamin' aroun' lookin' for the bunch we'd lost. Just casual like we drifts over into Mexico."

"Call it casual if you want," sniffs Pink. "That dang balloon——"

"Shut your trap!" I barks. I goes on. "Over there we see these here geldin's with the B. V. D. brand on, an' I says to myself that Ben wouldn't want no revolutionists to have his hosses on no account. So me'n Pink just slips up to the corral at night, turns the band loose an' drives 'em home. 'Course it was dangerous, an' all that, but we're loyal to you thataway."

"Ed," says the boss kinda grinnin', "I think you're a dang liar. Your story sounds a little fishy—I mean about drifting over into Mexico. You went there with malice aforethought."

"Mine was mal de mere," corrects Pink.

"But the fact remains that you did bring home the horses I thought were gone for good. That cinches a steady job with me. And for a reward, you two can ride to Maco tomorrow and take in the carnival. But don't go up in any balloons there. I heard that two punchers were set adrift there just the other day. They haven't heard from the men or the balloon either."

"What's more," says I, "they ain't goin' to."

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

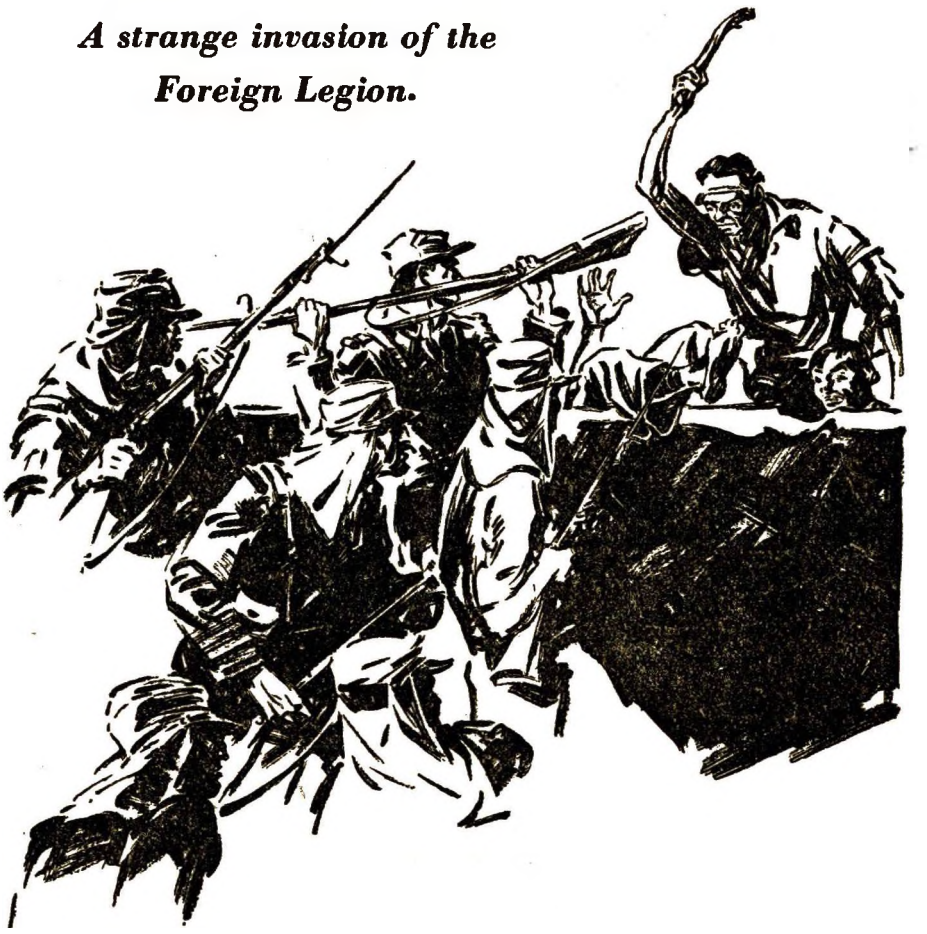
A "Major" Novelette

BAREHANDED

by

L. Patrick Greene

A strange invasion of the Foreign Legion.



THE SAXOPHONE SALUTE

By LEIGHTON H. BLOOD

SCHWALL, signal corporal of the 9th Company, 4th Regiment, *Legion Etrangère,* dropped his pliers on the rough table over which he was bending, picked up a set of ear phones, and adjusted them methodically to his squarish, Teutonic head. Then he threw a switch and began gently manipulating the dials on the black panel before him.

"Gut!" he said, nodding.

In the doorway of the radio lean-to, Tricot the Basque, a huge, barefooted figure in undershirt, khaki pants and an ancient and battered kepi, tugged at one side of his enormous, handle-bar mustache and watched the German intently.

"You get something?" he asked eagerly.

Schwall grunted.

"Something," Tricot persisted, "beside that cursed Seville, or that thrice-damned Eiffel Tower? Maybe the English station, 2LO, Yes?"

Still there was no answer from the German who went on twisting his dials with the deft hand of an expert.

"Mais oui." The Basque heaved a stentorian sigh. "This is the respect an old *legionnaire* gets from the men these days. This new-born babe of a corporal cannot even answer his captain. And this after I have drawn my hard-earned francs from

the *Banc de Maroc* and imported at great expense these electrical things from America, so that he shall have a fine radio to play with."

Schwall, the phones still at his ears, picked up a leather-covered code book that listed the stations by their call letters, and was ruffling the leaves. At length he halted and pinned down a page with a stubby forefinger. A slight, triumphant smile played about the corners of his mouth.

"Well?" cried Tricot. "Son of an onion, speak up. What have you?"

"America," said Schwall, his smile widening to a grin. "A most powerful short-wave station in America. It iss a goot radio, *mon capitaine. Ja. . . . Ganz gut!*"

"America! Ah!" Tricot's round face lit up with a bland, child-like smile. "Then let us have them, *mon petit.* If these Americans sing as loudly as they swear. . . . *Ah! Voila!*"

SCHWALL had thrown still another switch and the voice of the announcer came pouring through the loud speaker on the table.

". . . and gentlemen of the radio audience, it again gives me great pleasure to introduce Randy Kiley and his famous band in their regular weekly broadcast. . . ."

The announcer went dutifully through a monologue extolling the merits of a sponsor's product. Then came low, haunting strains of music, and a soft voice that blended its monotone into the orchestral background.

"Heigh Ho Everybody! Randy Kiley announcing and directing. Our first number on this week's program is one of the season's popular hits, 'If I Had A Girl Like You.'"

At the first words, Tricot's eyes had opened wide.

"Did you hear what I heard?" he demanded of the radio corporal.

The German shrugged.

"That one talks like a woman," said Tricot, shaking his head. "Listen! He now sings. Or is it singing? Come, tell me, Schwall, *mon enfant.*"

The German shrugged again and turned back to the radio. Tricot slid into a chair by the table and bent an attentive ear toward the loud-speaker.

"I believe it is a woman that tries to talk like a man," he said. "Is it for this that I have bought the so-fine radio? Are the Americans *cafard* that such a one should be let to sing where all can hear? About this I shall ask the American, Bill Gavin, when next I see him. 'If I Had A Girl Like You.'" He mimicked the crooner with a mincing twist of his broad hips. "Bah! What does that one want of a girl? But listen to him now. . . ."

The crooner was at it again. His song, this time, was, "Give Me Something To Remember You By."

"Mais oui! I, Tricot the Basque, would give you something to remember me by—if I had you here, my sweet little truffle! A week of pack drill, hey? Or perhaps a few pleasant duties as *garde de latrine.* Oh yes, my darling, you would remember old Tricot. *Ma foi!* You would never forget him."

TRICOTS new radio was a nine days wonder in the company, but no more so than the violent dislike Tricot himself had taken to the unseen American singer. The big Basque never failed to tune in on Randy Kiley's program. Sometimes, he would sit outside with the men, translating the song titles for the amusement of those who did not understand English, making pungent comments about the soft-voiced crooner amid the general laughter of his audience. But oftener, he would sit alone, muttering imprecations at the blank face of the loud-speaker and marveling at the strange customs of those crazy devils, the Americans.

"But truly, something is wrong in America," he told Schwall, after the supply camions had brought word from Lieuten-

ant Bill Gavin down at battalion headquarters. "Here I have a letter which says that this Randy Kiley is surely enough a man, and that every woman in the whole United States is *cafard* over a voice like that. Of a certainty, Schwall, something is wrong with that country."

Came a day when the voice of Randy Kiley vanished mysteriously from its accustomed spot on the air, and from then on, Tricot was like a man who has lost a dog.

THREE months later came a surprise visit from Lieutenant Bill Gavin. He tore out of the *bled* in his rakish Italian roadster, driven recklessly by a Haskell Indian named Charlie Two Blankets, skidded on two wheels through the big *poste* gate, and stopped with a grinding of brakes. Gavin jumped out and came striding toward the captain's *bureau*. Tricot met him at the door.

"Hah!" he cried. "Gavin, my good friend. Come! A bottle of wine we will have. *Oui,* and bring along that Indian devil, your *ordonnance. Tiens!* I shall make that one very drunk, for he is a fine fellow!"

Bill Gavin pulled a chair from the wall, sat in it and cocked his feet on the rough wooden table.

"Sit down," he said brusquely.

"Mais oui," Tricot seated himself, elbows on the table, his eyes on Gavin.

"A dozen *bleus* are on their way up," said Gavin, "to take the place of the men you invalided out with dysentery last month. They're almost here. Passed them on the road ten minutes ago. I beat it up with this, so you could look it over before they get in."

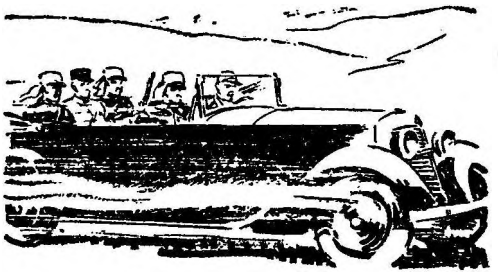
He fumbled in his blouse pocket and passed Tricot a clipping cut from an American newspaper of none-too-recent date. At the top, under the caption: "Lisping Lover Lams," was a picture of a young man with soulful eyes and thick, wavy hair; below it, a story headed:

RANDY KILEY DISAPPEARS

FAMOUS RADIO CROONER REPORTED FLEEING FROM BEAUTY WHO BROUGHT HEART-BALM ACTION

Tricot read the item through, scowling. "Hah," he cried, "so he runs from a woman. But why so much haste to tell me this before the *bleus* get here."

Bill Gavin lit a cigarette and blew a



funnel-shaped cloud of smoke out of the side of his mouth.

"Because," he said, "your little friend Kiley is one of the *bleus.*"

Tricot jumped to his feet. Bill Gavin waved him back into his chair.

"Now look here, old son, you've got to keep your shirt on."

"Join the Legion, will he?" Tricot bellowed. "Come here to laugh right in my face? But wait. I will show this he-woman."

"That," said Gavin, "is exactly what you're not going to do. If he was still a radio crooner—if he was just some damned gigolo singing in the cafés of Marrakesh—fine! You'd slough him and I'd throw out the pieces. But this is different. He's a *legionnaire* now—one of your own men. And as such, you've got to give him a break."

Tricot nodded slowly, his face puckered up in a pensive scowl.

"Nobody has yet said old Tricot is unfair with the men," he growled. "Bah! I will watch over that lisping one like a mother watches over her babe. I will change his diapers, even, if he so wishes.

But—*mon Dieu*—how I would like to give him the good American kick in the pants."

THERE was a mild commotion outside, and the sound of running feet on the firing platform overhead. A thin line of *legionnaires* had been sighted, plodding up the serpentine trail from the bottom of the *whadi*. They filed into the *poste* between lines of men gathered about the gate and lined up in front of the *bureau*. The sergeant in charge tapped on the jamb of Tricot's open door.

"I report with twelve *bleus, mon capitaine*".

"Bien, mon petit." The big Basque picked up his kepi, cocked it at a rakish angle over one eye, and rolled out onto the sun-scorched parade. Gavin followed.

There were twelve of them, as the sergeant had said—young German boys, most of them, with square heads and flat, unsmiling faces, enlisted in the Legion to escape the depression in the Fatherland.

Tricot went down the line reading aloud each man's name and nationality from the papers that were thrust into his hand, passed a jocose comment and finished with a welcoming handshake. Halfway down he paused.

"John Ran-dolph Kiley," he read, stumbling a bit over the middle name. "An American, hey? But certainly. And so you have come to us, my Romeo, to sing the Song of Death to the Berbers?"

The lad's face went suddenly white.

"I didn't come here to sing, *mon capitaine,"* he said stiffly.

Behind him, a man tittered, and for a split second the Basque's eyes blazed. Then he caught himself.

"Eh bien, mon petit," he said, smiling. "And if you but snap at the Berbers as you do at your captain—*sacré*—they will be selling lots in the M'Touga before the month is out."

He moved to the end of the line, turned the recruits over to a sergeant, and walked back to the *bureau*.

"He is fond of himself, that one," he told Gavin. "A veritable stuck-up. He did not come here to sing! Bah! No good will come of having him in the Legion."

Bill Gavin rose and stretched. "I'll have a talk with him," he said.

HE FOUND Kiley sitting apart from the rest of the *bleus*—a quiet, brooding lad whose reserve, amounting almost to sullenness, covered up an innate timidity. He answered questions politely, but without warmth, telling what he was asked—and no more. But from his admissions, his sometimes eloquent silences, and from what he already knew about the crooner, Gavin pieced out his story, the story of a shy boy suddenly catapulted into the limelight, surrounded by people who terrified him, hectored by promoters and press agents, the prey of the worldly-wise and a shining mark for all the grafters of a great metropolis.

His managers cheated him. The papers linked him with unsavory scandals. Every show girl in town who wanted a bit of cheap publicity sued him for breach of promise. He was thoroughly sick of the whole business, and there was a girl back in the home town who felt the same way about it. She sent back a ring after a particularly fetid tabloid story, and Randy Kiley had taken the next boat for France.

In Paris he had got morosely drunk and joined the Legion. And there he was. He didn't like it. He didn't hate it. He just didn't care.

It was the old, old story. Gavin had heard a dozen like it.

"If there is anything I can do for you ——" he began.

"There isn't, thank you."

"Well—call on me if you get in a jam."

"Thank you very much."

"Right-O! So-long, kid."

Gavin walked back to his car, where Tricot stood talking to Charlie Two Blankets.

"He's all yours," he said curtly. "Take care of him. And don't let him get hold

of any carbolic acid. He's liable to drink it."

He jumped into the seat beside the driver and waved a nonchalant farewell as the big car careened out of the gate and roared down the Grand Caravan Trail toward battalion headquarters.

RANDY KILEY never ceased, in his unwitting and unobtrusive way, to be a thorn in the flesh of Tricot, and the Basque had a sorrowful tale to tell when next Bill Gavin visited him.

"That one will be the ruin of me yet," he grumbled, jabbing his toe viciously into the soil of the parade, now soft and muddy from a week of rain. "At first he mopes, and writes interminable letters to a woman. The woman—an idiot if there ever was one—writes to Sidi Bel Abbes saying she is sorry to have sent the boy away, and will they please let him come home again. At Bel Abbes they laugh, and send the letter to me, but not before they have seen it in Oran, and Marrakesh, and *le bon Dieu* knows where else, and so, I become the joke of the Legion. Oh but I would like to wring the neck of that thrice-damned, woman-voiced rabbit!"

Gavin laughed. He, too, had seen the letter before it reached Tricot.

"You can't put him in jail for that," he said. "Is that all?"

"But no." Tricot aimed another savage kick at the Atlas mud beneath his feet. "There is more. After the letter comes, he mopes less. He makes friends with the men, and finds that many of them were once musicians. Now he must organize a band. With his own money he purchases instruments—gold-plated ones, no less—and has them sent up from Casablanca on the camions, and he is writing to Paris for a derby hat painted the color of gold, without which he says the American jazz cannot be played on the trombone. Did you ever hear of such craziness, Bill, my friend? Tell me, Gavin, *mon petit,* is the Legion to become a conservatory of music? Is this a *poste,* and am I a soldier? Or is it a dance hall I am captain of?"

Gavin shrugged. "What's the difference," he grinned, "as long as you draw your pay? The Legion won't go to Hell because a few punks take to horn-tooting."

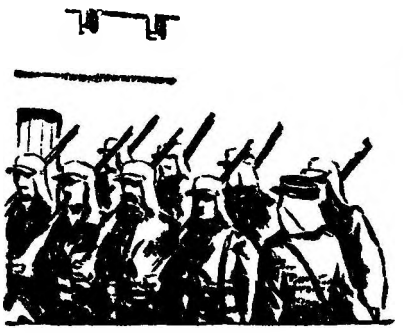
AND so, Randy Kiley's front-line band came into existence, and a queerer or more motley crew was never gathered together outside the pages of a novel. There was Rohde, one-time director of the Reichsbank and master mind of finance, who had fled to the Legion after his gigantic pyramid of credit had toppled and plunged all Germany into the doldrums of bankruptcy; there was Bruckmann, who, before the war, had been flutist for the Berlin Symphony, and there was Maltzman who, before women and drink got the best of him, had led his own orchestra in one of the beer gardens of Vienna. There were Bargeron and Folliard, the Belgian communists, who slept together and ate together, and bickered incessantly; there was Gonzales the ex-bullfighter, Castro, the Argentine gigolo, Zazheffski, once chess champion of Europe and Mahmoud Ben Moufa, a black Senegalese, who hammered a drum with a verve sprung from countless generations of beating on tom-toms.

Randy Kiley himself was a different man. Where Kiley the soldier had been shy, aloof and inclined to moroseness, Kiley the band leader was a human dynamo, lecturing his musicians, rehearsing them energetically through long evenings, writing his own scores and orchestrations, and sitting for hours beside Tricot's radio, pencil in hand and ruled paper at his elbow, keeping himself up to the minute on current hits in America.

In no time at all he had whipped his strangely assorted mob of outcasts into a crack, ten-piece band that was at once the pride of the company and of the countryside. Hard-bitten old compaigners forsook their drinking and card games to sit and gape and listen. Tricot's radio was forgotten as the *legionnaires* rallied round, volunteering to do extra work so that the

bandsmen assigned to guard duty could practice.

Each evening at dusk, dark, *burnoused,* figures, the peaceful natives of the neighborhood, would come trickling out of the *bled* and squat on their haunches in a great semicircle outside the open gates of the *poste.* There, with the true Berber passion



for music of any sort, they would sit and nod in silence while the syncopated strains of American jazz echoed through the hills of their native Atlas. Then, when the last note had died away, they would wander off again, gabling excitedly among themselves of the *roumi* musicians who made noises precisely like those of the talking machine in the *kasbah* of the Caid.

TRICOT alone had no good word, either for Randy Kiley or for his band, but now he held his peace, expressing himself freely only on those rare occasions when Bill Gavin visited him.

"The golden derby hat is not to be worn," he reported with a sigh of relief, "but only to be waved foolishly back and forth in front of the trombone. Bah! When will be the end of all this craziness? When will finish this nightly screeching of horns? See—I am no longer a soldier of the line. I am but a fat, lazy *Chef de Musique*—a thrice-damned leader of bandsmen. Look you over the wall—down there by the gate. They squat there like so many Burmese idols. I do not fight the Berber, but serenade him. Serenading in the M'Touga! Name of a Sacred Name! Who ever heard of such a thing?"

He spat angrily over the wall and yanked violently at the end of his mustache. *"Mais oui,"* he added as an afterthought, "and also, I would like to choke that whistle-voiced cabbage of a Kiley."

NEWS travels fast in the Berber country. Came a day when the Caid Abd El Talah, head of the Beni Zerka, rode out of the unpacified country to the southward for a parley with Tricot. He came ambling into the *poste,* a lean, hawk-nosed patriarch astride a sleek mule resplendent in a wooden saddle elaborately upholstered with red plush, and followed on foot by three fat Sheikhs in brown *burnouses* liberally streaked down the front with the stains of the succulent *cous-cous.*

He avowed his love for the French, expressed his heartfelt desire to submit to the rule of the Sultan at Rabat, peered covetously at the machine guns in the wall embrasures, and kept looking expectantly at the doors of the buildings that surrounded the little parade. He had heard, he said, of the *roumi* musicians who played talking machine music louder than any talking machine. Would Tricot sell him these musicians for many good francs from the *Banc de Maroc?*

Tricot was desolated. He said, with more truth than the Caid would ever realize, that he would like nothing better than to give his so lousy musicians to the Beni Zerka as a present from the Legion. But, unfortunately, they were *legionnaires,* and it was contrary to regulations to sell them.

He called out the band, and for an hour the old Caid listened to real jazz. Then he took a last, hungry look at the machine guns, eyed the coveted musicians longingly, and rode off on his upholstered mule, his *burnouse* flapping idly in the breeze, his fat Sheikhs shuffling dejectedly behind.

After that, things became ominously quiet. The nightly audience about the gate dwindled suddenly, and finally vanished altogether. Caravans coming up the trail from the south were noticeably fewer, and

word came down from the north that none at all were moving out of Marrakesh. Patrols reported the *bled* deserted, and what few peaceful natives could be found protested their ignorance with a vigor that was all too unconvincing.

Tricot called in his road details, doubled the frequency of his patrols, set his men to work deepening the firing trench outside the walls and strengthening the network of barbed wire that surrounded the whole.

"El Talah," he told his adjutant grimly, "will be down shortly to steal our machine guns and our music. Bah! If it were but the band the old mummy wanted, how gladly would I invite him in and let him take it."

The attack came at dusk—just as the coppery Atlas sun was dropping behind the serrated rim of the mountains to the westward. A sentry on the wall, watching the approach of a mounted patrol as it came plodding back up the slope after a day of scouting through the countryside, heard the sharp crack of a rifle and saw the leader pitch headlong from his mule. Instantly followed the crash of concerted fire. The remaining nine *legionnaires* of the patrol toppled almost as one man, and the mules, their backs suddenly swept clean of riders, went plunging in all directions over the boulder strewn terrain of the hillside. Then, magically, the *bled* was alive with running, brown-clad figures.

THE sentry shouted the alarm and ran to his firing position. A bugle blared. The men outside had dropped their work and were running for the gate. The men inside had dashed for their posts at the first sound of gunfire. Rifles were popping. The covers were being yanked from machine guns, and cocking devices were snapping back.

Tricot, who had been standing in front of the *bureau* when the alarm sounded, was up on the firing platform in a series of prodigious bounds, focussing his binoculars on the Berber swarm. They were halfway up the hill, a wild, disordered mob of them—tall and lean, clad in *burnouses* and *djellaba* robes—yelling, waving rifles, and shooting sporadically at the heads that appeared over the top of the parapet. On they came, howling and gesticulating; every sheltering rock adding its recruits to the swelling horde. Then, at two hundred yards, they ran into the first wavering bursts of machine gun fire from the walls, and melted into the ground again, to snipe from behind boulders and cacti, and to wait the cover of the quick-falling African night.

Methodically, Tricot estimated the number of the enemy. Fifteen hundred, at least. A hundred and twenty men wouldn't have a chance if that mob of yelling devils once got over the walls.

He let the glasses fall dangling on their carrying strap and went down the narrow stone stairway to the radio shack. Schwall was there ahead of him, smoking a stubby, black-bowled meerschaum and pounding away unconcernedly on a brass transmitter key.

"Telephone wire's cut," he grunted.

"The radio, then," Tricot ordered. "Tell the *commandant* it is an attack in force."

"*Ja.* That I already do." The German's hand left the key and reached for a pencil. "Shut up, now. I get message."

He wrote steadily for a minute on a pad at his elbow, then ripped off the top sheet and pushed it over his shoulder at Tricot.

"*Group mobile* pulling stalled supply train from *whadi* twenty kilometers north battalion post," it read. "Expect no relief before morning. (signed) Grioux, *Commandant.*"

Tricot snorted. Schwall was writing again. Now he turned halfway around in his chair.

"*Commandant* talking again," he announced. "He wants to know if we can hold out."

"Hold out?" Tricot ground his teeth. "How in a hundred hells do I know if we hold out? Am I a teller of fortunes?

But say to him, 'Yes,' that fat pig of a Grioux. Tell him that only by giving the Berbers presents can we induce them to remain till the *group mobile* arrives in the morning."

HE STRODE out of the shack and ascended to the wall again. Below, the Berbers were forming again, massing their forces for another rush attack. Tricot snatched up the whistle that dangled on a chain from the top button of his tunic and blew one short blast, the signal for attention.

"Prepare to fire in salvo," he ordered. "Brechtmann——" a blond giant in a tailored uniform, with the two gold stripes of a sergeant on his sleeve, stepped out from the parapet and saluted "—take your section and get out into the trench. Keep them away from the wire as long as you can. Hurry, now, son of an onion!"

The sergeant barked an order. Twenty men fell out of their positions along the wall and filed clattering down the stairs. They lined up in front of the gate, Indian file, rifles at the carry. Then the gate swung back a trifle, and one by one, under cover of the concerted fire from the north wall, they slipped through the narrow, ten-inch opening into the gathering darkness.

Up on the wall, other sections were closing in to fill the gaps left by the ones that had gone below. Tricot watched the last man double up like a jackknife and dart across the field of fire into the trench a dozen yards away. Then, suddenly, the Atlas night was over them like a blanket.

His orderly came up, like a well-trained automaton, a cumbersome Very pistol in his hand.

"Loaded with a parachute flare, *mon capitaine.*"

"Bien," said Tricot.

He thrust his head over the parapet and listened intently. Through the clatter of gunfire came the faint sound of movement on the hillside. Suddenly, the firing fell off in the Berber ranks. Then came a series of high-pitched yells that swelled at once to an eerie howl, and the sound of lead spattering against the stone side of the parapet.

Tricot raised the Very pistol and pulled the trigger. The gun boomed hollowly. High in the air, a line of sparks ripped the black sky. Then came a blinding flash of white light that floated lazily overhead, illuminating the terrain for half a mile around.

IN THE second that followed, all hell broke loose. A howl of alarm went up from the Berber ranks. Then they came on again, yelling and shooting, their flapping *burnouses* throwing weird shadows on the circle of light cast by the flare. On the walls, machine guns were chattering hysterically, blending their staccato bark with the roar of salvo fire from parapet and trench and the curses, in German, Russian and Bulgarian, of a gun crew laboring to clear a jammed piece and get it back into action. Dead men were falling—wounded men groaning. Bullets snapped against the parapet—groaned and whistled in the air overhead. Then, as suddenly as it had started, it was all over. The Berber lines wavered under the galling fire from the walls, then broke and ran for the cover of the rocks below. The guns in the *poste* stuttered to a halt, and the *bled* was still, save for the sputtering of the flare overhead.

Tricot made his way slowly along the platform, inspecting the damage, pausing now and then to speak a word of encouragement to his men. Like a well-ordered mechanism, the *poste* was putting itself in order again. Ammunition was being rushed to the walls from the store in the magazine. Casualties were being carried from the firing platform. The dead were

being laid out in neat rows along the west wall—the wounded, huddled in a little group before the sergeant's quarters, were being taken in, one by one, for attention by the company *infirmier*.

Tricot counted them. Twenty—eight of them dead. And the men in the trench outside had yet to be accounted for. They came in now—three *legionnaires* dragging a dead man apiece; five *blessés*, crawling; a sixth, too far gone to crawl, carried in on an improvised stretcher of coats and rifles. Twenty-nine in all—almost a quarter of his company.

He detailed a handful of men to stay on the walls, and ordered the remainder down to rest. Things would be quiet for a while now. The Berber routine seldom varied. There would be another attack at midnight and—if any survived in the *poste*—an attack at dawn.

A SECOND attack was beaten off and Tricot had less than fifty *legionnaires* to man the walls. Petsch, his adjutant, came up, bleeding from a wound in his shoulder, and the big Basque went to work with iodine and bandages.

"They fight well, these Berbers, eh Petsch, *mon comrade?*"

"They will attack again in the morning," said Petsch.

"Mais oui," said Tricot with a harsh laugh. "We will be shooting at angels from the walls of Hell, come this time tomorrow, eh?"

The adjutant shrugged.

"The relief should get here at daybreak," he said slowly. "It may be that they will come in time."

Tricot shook his head.

"The Berbers will see the column coming and attack while it is two miles away. With but fifty men in the *poste*—bah—one real rush and it will be over."

Petsch nodded slowly, then fell silent.

"If we could but delay them for a few minutes," he said finally. "A sacrifice unit—four or five men, say, with a machine gun. Send them over the south wall and through the Berber lines to fire on them from the rear as soon as they launch their attack. It might divert them, *mon capitaine,* coming from the south where it is not expected."

Again Tricot shook his head. "A machine gun, no," he said frowning. "For who would ever hear them in the heat of a charge. Artillery, maybe, if we had it. But it would take more than machine guns to divert a Berber."

He came to the end of his bandage and looped it into a sling. "No, Petsch, my little truffle, it is no use. At dawn, they will come, and we shall go to Hell as gentlemen and *legionnaires* should. Bah—that Kiley. He and his band. It is for them that a hundred and twenty good men will soon be cut to mincemeat by Berber knives. It is because of that thrice-damned he-woman that we are now——"

He broke off suddenly and looked up. Kiley was standing over him, his face white, his mouth set in a straight, grim line.

Tricot's face turned red. "Hey—how now," he stammered. "Speak of the devil, and lo, he appears. Even now, *mon petit,* I have been losing this old head of mine and cursing you up and down for what is properly no fault of your own. Ah, well, we are all of us a bit *cafard* when the fight is going wrong, eh? And what is it that you wish, by son? What can old Tricot do for you?"

The lad was standing at rigid attention, his face unsoftened by Tricot's lame apologies.

"My section sergeant," he said stiffly, "wishes permission to draw ammunition from the emergency store."

"And he shall have it," Tricot nodded. "But stay. So you have been doing a little serenading with machine guns instead of flutes and saxophones, eh, my lad? And how is your fine band? Has it fared badly at the hands of these so-naughty Berbers?"

"Only the *legionnaire* Rohde, *mon capitaine.* He is wounded in the arm."

Tricot pulled at his mustache. "That big cabbage of a Rohde," he chuckled. "He collects bullets here as he collected marks in Germany. Will his wound interfere with his drinking? Bah, the joy of life would be gone for that one if he could not drink."

"The sergeant said it was only a flesh wound," Kiley replied.

"Then Rohde is saved for the canteen," Tricot decided. "But go, my son. Tell your sergeant he may have the ammunition he wishes."

Young Kiley left, walking very erect, his clenched hands hanging stiffly at his sides. Half an hour later, Tricot saw him again. He was sitting below on an empty ammunition case, his chin pillowed in his cupped hands, a brooding scowl furrowing his high, handsome brow.

THEN, as Tricot watched, a strange play began acting itself out down there in the courtyard. Bruckmann, the sour-faced little flutist, who never smiled or had a good word for anyone, walked up to the boy, put an arm around his shoulder, and spoke to him quietly. Then Bruckmann left, and one by one, the other members of the band went over to repeat the little flutist's performance. Suddenly, they were all together, huddled in a corner of the parade, talking earnestly, then Tricot saw the boy Kiley detach himself from the group and walk toward him.

He came up and saluted with a formal click of the heels.

"The band is sorry, *mon capitaine,* that it has brought this attack upon the company."

Tricot colored anew. "Forget it, my son," he said gruffly. "You did nothing wrong. There is nothing to be sorry for. Run along, now, and tell your band old Tricot values them highly—oh, very highly indeed."

The lad inclined his head slightly.

"Thank you, *mon capitaine.* The band wishes——"

"Bah—did I not say to forget it?" Tricot's voice rose to a roar. "Run along. Tell the band I blame them for nothing."

The boy held his ground.

"The band requests permission——"

Tricot leaped to his feet, tugging savagely at his mustache.

"Permission," he bellowed. "Bah—anything. Rum—tobacco—anything at all. A month's leave in Paris if you wish. Now go, boy. Bother me no more."

Kiley saluted and was gone. Tricot looked at his watch. Two o'clock. Still a few hours of grace before the Berbers rushed again. He stretched, yawned mightily, and leaned his big body against the parapet to rest, his head on his hand, his eyes roving restlessly over the black expanse of the silent *bled.*

THE next time Tricot looked at his watch it was four-thirty. In a few minutes, the east would be growing gray. He stretched again, and gave the order that would send the men below back to their positions on the wall.

In the courtyard there was a quiet bustle of activity, then the sound of many feet pattering up the stairway. Tricot walked slowly around the platform, counting as he went. When he had circled the wall, he stopped frowning. Now there were but forty. Kiley and his band had vanished!

His face hardened.

"Search the quarters below," he told his adjutant. "And do not hesitate to use the pistol if you find them hiding. Send the sergeants to me immediately. Go!"

The sergeants came. They knew nothing. The adjutant returned, walking briskly.

"The *burnouses* are gone from the sergeant's quarters," he announced. "Also your own, which was hanging in the *bureau.*"

A sentry threw more light on the mystery. "They were over there," he said, pointing to a dark corner of the south wall. "They carried the *burnouses* under their arms, but I did not know then what they were, for it was very dark."

Tricot walked slowly down the platform. In the corner where the sentry had pointed, a short piece of rope dangled over the side of the wall. He picked it up, held it across the palm of his hand for a moment, and then, with a curse, threw it down on the floor of the platform.

"It is the work of Ben Moufa, the black man," said a *legionnaire,* nodding sagely. "He, himself, when I was a *bleu,* taught me the trick of tying a knot so that a rope can be yanked down from below, leaving but just such a fragment behind."

Tricot shook his head slowly.

"It is the end," he muttered. *"Mais oui* —the last straw."

He went down to the yard, unlocked the door of the shed where the ammunition was stored, ripped the top board from a case of dynamite, and thrust in the end of a length of fuse. Then he climbed wearily back to the parapet.

"When they drive us from the walls," he said grimly, "rally around the magazine."

Some of the men were silent. Others nodded, understanding.

HE TURNED to the wall to watch for the coming of the enemy. It was only a question of minutes now. Already the first tinge of gray was showing on the eastern horizon. Once the sun came up —once the heads of Tricot and his men were silhouetted against the morning sky, easy targets for the hillmen's rifles—then that shrieking horde would be on them again and it would be all over.

A cry from the north wall drew the big Basque's attention. Far away, a beam of light stood out against the brightening sky. The relief column had topped the last rise and was racing for the fort. Once—six hours before—its approach would have brought shouts of joy from the men on the parapet. Now it was only hastening the end.

The Berbers, too, had seen that signal. Now they came—a sea of vague forms rushing up out of the darkness below. Again their shrill yells echoed among the rocks. Again long poles rested against the parapet, and dark, *burnoused* figures, howling above the din of gunfire, leaped and clambered up the towering walls. Then, suddenly, the attack died.

The hillmen in the rear had stopped in their tracks and were milling about in bewildered silence. Those under the walls scattered and fell back. In the twinkling of an eye, the charging horde had become an aimless, surging mob, cut and harried by the rifle fire from the *poste.* Then,

above the clattering of his own machine guns, Tricot's ear caught a strange and alien sound. From somewhere to the southward, the lively strains of American jazz was echoing across the *bled!*

The big Basque ran for the south wall. Petsch, the adjutant, was there before him, staring out into the empty waste from which the sounds were coming. Then, around the corner of a hillock a thousand yards away, came a ghostly procession, heads up, shoulders back, gold glinting from their instruments in the first rays of the morning sun—marching two by two into the face of the enemy.

Petsch's nerves snapped. His fingers gripped Tricot's shoulders convulsively.

"Merciful Heaven," he screamed, *"the band!*

FROM the north came the staccato crackle of machine gun fire. A double line of olive-drab figures came up out of

the *bled,* moving swiftly, the sun glinting on their bayonets. Now the first notes of the "Charge of the Legion" rang from the brass throats of a half dozen bugles. The *group mobile* had arrived.

To the east and west, the Berbers were running. Now, under the south wall they broke and fled. Tricot leaped to the parapet, waving his pistol.

"A moi!" he bellowed.

He lowered himself over the wall and dropped to the ground. With a yell, his men followed—thirty of them—all that were left of the company—charging the tail of the fleeing Berbers.

In a little hollow of the ground they came upon nine men sprawled—the band. A tenth, propped up on one elbow, eyes staring, was clicking an empty pistol at empty air.

SCHWALL dropped his pliers on the rough table that stood in the corner of the radio shack and began fumbling in the innards of the set before him. Tricot stirred fretfully in his chair.

"Bah — have you not got it fixed, Schwall, you *dumkopf?* Devil take the thrice-damned machine, that on this, of all days, it should take it into its crazy head to break down and be silent. Well—what say you, Schwall? Can you get it fixed in time?"

Schwall grunted.

Tricot yanked angrily at his mustache. "So!" he exclaimed bitterly. "A grunt I must take for an answer. Am I a pig that I should understand such language? Schwall, must you shame me in front of these, my guests? For that Bill Gavin I do not care. He knows you for the surly bear that you are. But how does it sound to the good Colonel DeLisle? Speak, son of an onion. How does it sound?"

Schwall turned a blank face to his interrogator. "If I can, I fix," he said bluntly, and went back to his work.

Tricot sighed heavily and turned to where Bill Gavin sat with Colonel DeLisle, of the *Etat Major General,* down from Paris on a tour of inspection of the only active front.

"And so," he said, taking up the thread of his discourse where he had left off, "we sent them back on camions to the hospital at Marrakesh. It is a miracle that none of them died, though Castro did go completely *cafard* and will sit all day firing an empty pistol at nothing."

"And the rest got well?" asked DeLisle, raising his eyebrows.

"Oh, well enough," Tricot shrugged. "A leg or two, I believe, was left behind in the hospital. The others—but you must understand that this is unofficial—are as well as you and I. I invalided them all out, though—all but poor Castro. Bah—what would you. The boy—Kiley—he was in love. Continually in his delirium he called the name of his woman. Then there is the journalist who makes the so-great story that reaches America, and the offer that comes from the rich man in this Chicago for Kiley to have his band play to make public on the air his sausage business. And for fifteen thousand American dollars, *mon colonel!* So—well—what would you? Would Tricot pass up a chance to make fifteen thousand dollars a week—even for somebody else that he was making it? And the boy was in love. I sent him home to his girl."

Schwall grunted and threw a switch. The loud-speaker came to life. A soft voice crooned tenderly of an open fireside and love.

Tricot jumped to his feet. "It is he," he cried. "There, now you hear him. It is not a woman, DeLisle, my friend. That I swear to you. It is a man. Name of a sacred name, yes—a man. A thousand Berber devils would he fight with a saxophone, would that one Kiley, and if it had not been for the girl he would be chasing these mountains now. And he sounds happy again, does my little truffle and my so good band that charmed the *slurs* long enough for the *group mobile* to get within range."

THE STRONG HENCHMAN

By

KERRY WOOD

One man who challenged the North.

THE matter seemed of small importance at the moment, but it stayed in Paul Weaver's mind.

He had been turning the dials of his old-fashioned two-tube radio, which had caused him so much careful effort to bring from Fur Point some three winters back. As yet Paul had not settled to any station definitely, but was sampling the programs of all within range before choosing one for his evening's entertainment. A world famous trio failed to hold his interest; he gave the finder a slight twirl.

Instantly a voice came strong and real through the ear-phones.

"——nor is this strange. Nature, as you all know, is only interested in the best. Every power at her command is devoted to the killing of the weak, and the strong live just so long as they have the strength to hold their own against her. The moment they lose this strength, they cease to be the best, and Nature's forces start to conquer. Her henchmen are everywhere, doing her work——"

The words faded abruptly, the rhythmic throb of a dance orchestra sounding faintly in their place. Weaver tuned in this new station, listening until the call letters were given. Then he spun the dial again. Thus he travelled the full circle of the finder. In the end a favorite station was selected, where Hawaiian music was the night's offering.

HALF an hour later, the northland cold robbed the cabin of comfort. Paul put aside the head-phones to jump up and ram the tiny stove's maw full of thick log lengths. As he stood beside it, waiting for the fuel to catch, the trapper glanced with pride at the fur-clad stretching boards hung thickly on the walls of the shack.

"By Gee!" he suddenly laughed. "I guess I'm one of them henchmen fellers myself, an' never knew it till now."

The thought amused him.

"Paul Weaver, trapper an' Nature's henchman! Ho!"

The flames roared in the stove. He slammed the drafts shut and half closed the pipe damper. Then he continued his soliloquy aloud.

"What was it that guy said, now? Somethin' about Nature usin' all her powers to kill off the weak things? Well, I qualify as bein' one of her powers, I guess. I trap off these wild critters of hers, the foxes an' lynx, marten, mink, muskrat, an' the rest. If they were stronger'n me, they'd be out to kill me. But because I've got them beat as to brains, I'm stronger'n they are. That feller was dead right. The strong against the weak, that's all it is. All the time." Weaver laughed again. "An' tomorrow I carry the fight into new country, too. Out northwest there, to lay a new trap-line. Old Nature, you sure can depend on it that this here henchman of yours will do his stuff by you out in them wilds!"

He chuckled, then gave the stove logs a final poke into place and returned to his radio concert.

II

IT WAS not yet light when the trapper hurried from his cabin next morning to visit the rabbit snares he had put out to catch some trap bait. The catch pleased him. Of the three snares set, two had been effective. The brass wires were imbedded deep in the frozen necks of two rabbits, their white forms stiff in the grotesque strained posture preceding death. Weaver took the pair back to the shack, tossing them under the stove to thaw while he busied himself preparing a breakfast.

"They'll come in real handy," he commented as he cooked. "What with that plague comin' two winters ago an' killin' off the bunnies, the lynx go pop-eyed looney at the sight of rabbit bait, an' almost step into the traps cheerful in their hurry to get a mouthful."

Finishing a hearty meal of thick flapjacks, corn syrup, and coffee, he quickly packed his knap-sack, deftly arranging the heavier articles on the bottom for carrying comfort. When it was swung to his shoulders, the weight brought a grunt from him. The pack contained a heavy assortment of steel traps, a few coils of snare wire in different sizes, two thick blankets, a can of blood for baiting purposes, and a small quantity of food and a pot for boiling water.

"Guess I'll leave the rifle behind," he decided, adjusting the shoulder straps. "'Course, it's my first trip into that country, an' maybe I'd get a chance to sight up on somethin', but I can't handle all the weight comfortable."

After belting on a hand axe, Weaver carefully raked the hot coals into the ash pan and shut all the stove drafts to avoid fire risks. Then he picked up the limp bodies of the rabbits and strode out, vigorously slamming the door shut behind him. A brief pause at the doorway, while the snowshoes thongs were fastened around his moccasined feet, then he was away.

BY NOON, the pack was easier on his shoulders. Most of the larger steel traps had been set out. The smaller ones and the snares were saved for the more distant work. He had made some careful sets for coyote and fox early in the day, finding promising signs of these animals. The encumbering rabbits had also been disposed of, one being used as a fox bait, the other hung five feet or so above a large No. 3 trap set for lynx.

Paul glanced at his watch to confirm his guess of noontide, then slipped out of his snowshoes and pack straps for a short halt. A fire was lit, the trapper making himself a pot of tea to wash down the bannock that made his meal. Following the repast, he kicked snow on the flames and trekked on, eager to lay more fur sets in this promising wilderness.

Towards the middle of the afternoon, he had set out the last of the steel traps.

The snares came in for their share of attention, then. Weaver found a small creek bed, and journeyed along its frozen surface for several winding miles, putting snares at the entrances of the bank holes to catch mink and weasel.

AROUND four o'clock, the man suddenly noticed that the woods were deathly still. Paul looked up through the trees. Gray clouds were spread across the entire sky, hanging low and heavy. A wind was marshalling them in fast moving columns, though the woods below were breathless. The threat was ominous.

"Storm," the man muttered, leaving the creek bed. "Looks kinda bad, but I guess maybe it's mostly looks. Had one only last week, so we won't get another big storm yet awhile, I think. Still, I'd better get a move on an' fix me a shelter for the night."

He had expected to spend the night in the wilds, bringing along the blankets and food enough for supper and breakfast. Laying a new trap-line is not accomplished in one day.

The trap-line takes the form of a large irregular circle, starting and ending at the trapper's cabin. Usually the complete distance for those to be inspected in a day's run is between fifteen and twenty-five miles. The traps are set out alongside the trail, lifted when an animal is caught, or moved to more favorable locations according to the snow signs. A trapper works three or four such lines continually, visiting them in turn so that each trap gets his inspection once every three or four days.

Weaver had never worked the territory to the northwest of his shack, finding the east and south country profitable enough to keep him busy until just lately. Now, however, he wanted virgin country to yield him heavier returns, and so turned to this raw territory to the northwest. He intended to establish a one day run, and to this end had struck out west from his cabin, gradually turning northwards. On the morrow, he would return to his headquarters, and the following day head out north with another load of traps and snares. This second journey would swing west to join his first day's line and complete the trap circle.

"I estimate I've come maybe fourteen miles," Weaver told himself as he hunted for a location for his shelter. "That is, by trail. Across country, I'm maybe nine miles from the shack. When I come out the next trip, north, I'll have to close in on this trail within ten miles, so's to give me a total run of about twenty-five miles. That's enough for me."

IN A few minutes he had found what he sought, a small clearing in the midst of a thick grove of close-growing young spruces. These smaller trees would give greater protection from a storm than the larger ones, he knew. Paul swung off his knapsack and slipped his feet free of the snowshoe thongs. With one of the large webs as a shovel, he scooped out a hollow in the deep crusted snow. In a short time a patch roughly eight feet square had been cleared to the level of the frozen ground.

He wiggled into his snowshoes again and pulled his axe out of its sheath, tramping off into the woods. Four or five bushy young spruces were soon cut and dragged back to the site of the shelter. The needled branches were lopped off. With some cord pulled from a pocket, Paul quickly lashed the stripped trunks together in the form of a lean-to. Over the rude frame was stretched a number of birch and poplar saplings. On top of these wands, the trapper piled the spruce branches.

"By Gee," he exclaimed, stopping the work long enough to glance overhead. "Them clouds is scootin' along faster'n

ever. Maybe we're in for an all night blizzard, at that."

ON THE thought, Weaver seized the axe again and chopped down more spruce, using half the boughs to make the roof and walls of the hut more solid. The naked trunks of the trees he lopped into sections and placed on top of the branches to hold them in position. A bed was made on the floor of the shelter with the remaining boughs, the coarser branches being on the bottom, the twigs on the surface, resulting in a springy mattress some foot or more in depth.

A wind had sprung up to shatter the stillness of the woods, meanwhile, and, feeling the chill of it, Weaver hastened to gather in a supply of fire wood. This task took the longest, as he had to go farther and farther away from the hut in his search for dry timber. Although his watch told him that it was only half past five, it was almost dark as he piled up dead poplars, birches, and thick willows to last the night.

"She's gettin' infernal cold." He hesitated, then went out with the axe again to knock down another dead poplar he had marked on his last trip. "Maybe I'd better play safe an' rare around in this dark an' find a few more dry sticks, just in case of trouble."

The wind whipped up stronger, whining through the hedge of evergreens to scour the clearing. The sky was unnaturally black. Even the snow seemed to have taken on color from the clouds, and afforded little light. The air frosted the breath, so that it rose in puffs of vapor, and the cold bit into the exposed flesh of the face with sharp intensity. Cold and dark. Spruces loomed large and black, filled with deep shadows, and stirred restlessly under the whisperings of the eerie wind.

The man finished his wood hauling work in silence. He built a fire reflector in front of his lean-to with some green poplar logs, then squatted down to kindle a blaze.

"Ain't no foolin' in that breeze," he shivered, chilled through in the moment of comparative inaction while he had been whittling shavings. "Soon's I get a fire goin', I'm goin' to wrap up in a blanket an' drink 'bout ten gallons of boilin' hot tea. Sure goin' to be a stormy night."

He took a match from his water-proof container, and managed to shelter the tiny stab of flame long enough to get his shavings afire. Carefully feeding these with coarser whittlings, the blaze was gradually built up to a crackling healthy flame that radiated cheering light and heat. Paul warmed his hands appreciatively.

"Here she comes," he commented, seeing fine white flakes scudding to earth within the flare of the firelight. "Sleet. The coldest snow there is, an' a cold wind to carry it." The trapper stood up and tested the wind with a moistened finger. "She's veered, too. Comin' from northwest direct, an' comin' like mad. Well, I got me a fire, an' I got grub. Nothin' to worry about. Let the storm come. Me, I'm goin' to make some supper."

First, though, he pulled a blanket out of his knapsack and wrapped it around his shoulders. Seated thus before the bright flames, Weaver prepared the meal. Snow was melted for tea, the water coming to a boil quickly on the fierce willow coals. He dumped in half his stock of tea leaves and pulled the pot off to the side. For the rest, a large chunk of fat pork and a huge bannock, both already cooked, filled out the bill. The trapper drew out his knife and carefully divided both the meat and the biscuit into two equal parts, stowing half of each away for his breakfast. Then the pork was heated over the coals on the end of a stick and the bannock toasted in the same way. Paul fell to with a hearty appetite.

It was in the comfortable aftermath of the meal, while he was slowly sipping his third pot of tea, that the trapper thought of his radio. And thinking of it brought the other matter to his mind again.

"I almost forgot," he chuckled. "Here

we are, ole Nature an' me. She's the boss, an' I'm her henchman. I served the old girl pretty heavy today, too, she'll have to admit. Let's see, now. I set out nine steel traps an' maybe a dozen snares. That's 'bout twenty-five fur sets, an' they're bound to bring in a good share of lynx, coyote, fox, mink, an' maybe a marten. Nature ain't got no kick comin' that I don't serve her good."

Weaver laughed. The wind shrieked over the tiny clearing and went whining across the black wilderness. A flying blanket of sleet, borne in the wind's arms, scurried thickly downwards and whitened the fire-lit circle. The blaze seemed suddenly small and frail in the snow-filled world.

"By Gee, now," the man shivered, "that wind seemed to be givin' me my laugh right back, it did." He mused on the thought. "Golly, when you come to think it out, the wind an' the snow an' the cold an' that; they're all Nature's henchmen, too. You bet. They're tryin' their best to kill off the weak things. For that matter, they're tryin' to kill off anythin', weak or strong. Me included. By Gee! That's right. We're her henchmen, me an' the storm out there, but we're a-fightin' each other."

The thought seemed to amuse him, for he put back his head and roared with mirth. The sound was lost in the stronger sweep of the mad wind. Weaver grew silent, his smile fading. But whatever was in his mind, he kept to himself, frowning into the whispering darkness around him.

Presently he roused himself to pile more logs on the fire. When the newly added fuel was aflame, he loosened his belt, removed his moccasins, and then rolled himself in the blankets for sleep.

WEAVER spent a poor night. The cold roused him at short intervals, when he had to get out of the blankets to stir the fire and build it up again. The wind seemed stronger, too, and appeared to take delight in probing through his crude shelter with chilling fingers. Even in his thick woolen clothing, with the blankets and the fire, the trapper could find little comfort.

With the coming of morning, the wind died away, and the air became somewhat warmer. The snow did not abate in the least, but came down fast and thick in an endless dropping curtain of white. Paul set about preparing his breakfast, eyeing the stormy world distrustfully.

"It's kinda risky," he presently announced, munching on the remains of the bannock. "This country's all new to me, northwest of my shack. Still, I guess I'm woodsman enough to be able to strike across country and reach home all right. That's about nine miles; I can make it in two-three hours easy enough."

He finished his breakfast and stepped clear of the shelter. The snow swirled around him, the breeze picking up suddenly. It died away as abruptly, leaving him in the midst of the densely thick snowflakes.

"Hump," the man muttered, retreating to the shelter of the lean-to again. "Somehow or other, it don't look so good, out in it. I kind of don't like it. Maybe I better play safe an' follow my trap-line back. This country's plenty wild, an' it'd be easy to go a-stray in this thick snow."

The fire had died down. The gray ashes looked cheerless to his sight. Weaver rolled his blankets, stuffed them into the knapsack, then stood up again to frown at the storm.

"By Gee, but I don't like it," he muttered. "She looks kind of bad. My tracks'll be all filled in, back on that trapline, too. I'll have to go by the trap sets."

He hesitated a moment more, then stopped suddenly and piled wood on the fire.

"I think I'll just hang around an hour or so," he told himself. "By noon, the storm should fade away some. I'll tackle it then. It won't hurt none to wait, because I can make it in three-four hours, even if I do go back on the trap-line. Yes, sir; I'll just sit around till noon an' see how things frame out."

Drawing his knife, he whittled aimlessly on sticks, piling the shavings on the flames at intervals. The time dragged. The snow fell silently, thickly, steadily.

Towards half past eleven the flakes hurried down slantingly. A wind had risen. Within a few moments, the large soft flakes gave place to small sleet. A rising whine informed the trapper of the change. He looked up, dismayed.

"Darn that wind," he grumbled. "Ain't no sense now in waitin' any more. The storm won't die out yet awhile, with it to help it along. I needn't stop another sec. Gettin' kind of hungry, anyway. It won't be much trouble, I guess, to follow back the trap sets."

He adjusted his knapsack on his shoulders and writhed his feet into the snowshoe thongs. After nudging some snow over the fire, automatically, he turned and set off into the white wilderness without a backward glance at the inviting shelter.

III

A FEW minutes later he reached the creek bed. The wind swept briskly down the water way, driving the cold sleet before it. Weaver turned up his mackinaw collar and trudged along at a steady long-paced stride.

For the first quarter mile or so, the trapper watched the sides for his snare sets. He had to locate these independently of his yesterday's trail, which had been blotted out by the wind and snow. None of the snares would have caught any animal, he knew, since wild creatures seldom move abroad during a storm. But for a time it interested him to investigate the sets and eye them with satisfaction.

Then the creek doubled back on itself for a distance, forcing him to walk straight into the teeth of the wind. Paul forgot about the sets then, being content to pull his woolen cap low over his eyes and hunch his shoulders against the chilling sleet. When the course veered around with the wind again, he increased his speed to a swinging trot to make up for the slow travel against the storm.

Thus he continued for upwards of an hour, and then began to take interest in the banks once more. Where he had joined the creek the day before, he had displaced an overhanging hummock of snow when sliding down to the stream's bed. This heap would now serve him as a sign to tell him where to leave the water course. He watched for it with increasing vigilance.

It was only a short moment later when he rounded a bend and caught sight of a forks, where the stream separated into two branches. Weaver stopped, puzzled at this. He could not remember noticing the thing the day before. Still, he must have passed it, for he had not yet found the hummock of snow that marked his entrance to the creek bed.

"Maybe I was watchin' one bank close at the time an' never noticed the other fork at all," he muttered, seeking an explanation. "Guess that must be it. Now the thing what's botherin' me is, which branch do I follow?"

After a brief halt he decided on the southern fork, considering that his shack lay somewhat to the south and east of him. Another matter swayed him, too, since the snow had been swept away at the entrance to the northern branch to reveal a sheet of blue ice. Paul could not remember crossing any bare ice the previous day, so he went forward confidently along the other stream, again on the lookout for the snow pile mark.

HE HAD been on this branch creek perhaps half an hour, and was beginning to wonder why he did not come across the snow hummock when the reason con-

fronted him in the presence of a huge tangle of logs, blocking his way. The significance of this stopped him short. He had crossed no such log jam the day before. It could mean but one thing; he was on the wrong fork of the stream.

On the thought, Weaver turned to retrace his steps.

"Well, now," he halted again, reflecting, "there's no need of me goin' back all that way, when I can save time cuttin' 'cross country. I'll just climb up the bank here an' hit over north an' strike the other branch that way. I'm losin' too much time on this darn creek, anyway."

He suited action to the word, clambering up the bank and heading through the flying sleet. As he did so, he heard the wild whistle of the wind in a tall spruce nearby.

Weaver stopped. The sound caused cold fingers of doubt to take hold of his mind. Perhaps—— Was it better to play safe and retreat back along the creek bed to the forks?

Bosh! he told himself scornfully. He was letting that wind get on his nerves, and it was turning him into an over cautious fool. All bosh. He was woodsman enough, surely, to hit across country and find the other fork of the stream. Sure he was. It couldn't be more than half a mile, anyway. As for it being safe—absolutely safe this way. And it would save time, too.

BUT after doing more than a mile of rough travel, Weaver was convinced that it was not so easy as he had thought to find the other branch of the elusive creek. He paused in the shelter of a hill and roundly cursed himself for a fool. He should have followed that south branch back to the forks, wind or no wind. That was common sense. There was no need of him showing his foolish bravado, just to answer the challenge of a little noise in the tree tops. That was all the wind was. And he had been crazy enough to let it get him into this mess.

The hands of his watch told him that it was nearly two o'clock. That meant there remained only three more hours of good daylight. Three hours!

"Darn!" he grumbled. "Not very long, three hours. Guess there's nothin' else for it but to head out straight for the shack an' forget all about them creeks an' about followin' back my trapline. Come to think of it, maybe that hummock of snow I

was a-lookin' for went an' got swept away by the wind las' night, an' maybe I went an' walked right past the place. Guess I did, come to think it out. I sure don't remember them forks yesterday, so maybe that explains the way of it. But there ain't no sense worryin' 'bout it any more. I'll just speed up a piece an' head direct for the shack. Ought to reach it just in time for supper—an' I sure could use some supper, all right!"

THE sleet had given place to large flakes. The wind had died away to a faint current, directing the snow. It was warmer. Weaver noticed this, and for a moment it pleased him to consider it a good omen. Then doubt returned. With the thickening snow that the warmth brought, it was easier to get confused. He dismissed the thought irritably.

The trapper settled down to a steady dog trot, easy on his lungs and yet fast enough to eat up the miles. He had perhaps eight miles or so to cover before he reached his cabin, and some three hours to do it in. That was lots of time, of course. By rights, he should make it within two hours. And the sooner he reached the shack, the sooner he would be able to satisfy his hunger. He pressed on.

The country was very much the same. Groves of spruce trees, some naked stands of poplars, here and there some towering leafless balms, and once in a while a clump of birch conspicuous by their fine bushy

branches and white bark. There were small hills, small valleys, with an occasional larger ridge rising above the others to break the monotony a little. Some of the hills were spruce clad, others were bare. The valleys were uniformly clothed with stands of young poplars and spruces.

Everything was wild. Not a tree had felt an axe. Not a sign of man anywhere, save for his own snow-shoe track behind. A lonely country. And the loneliness gripped Weaver.

"Aw, snap out of it," he grunted to himself. "No need to get scary over a few trees an' hills an' valleys. All new country looks lonely. It's a darn good thing for you, too, that it is lonely, or there wouldn't be so many furs to catch in it."

He loped along a little farther, then halted for a brief breathing spell. While resting, he remembered about the time, and pulled back his coat sleeve to uncover his wrist watch.

"Holy Smoke! Half past three!" He stared again to make sure. "Golly! There's no more rest for you, not until you get there. You only got an hour an' a half of clear daylight. The shack shouldn't be far off now, but you want to reach it afore that hour an' a half's up. Get a move on!"

HE HURRIED on, trying to keep anxious thoughts from coming. But he was worried. It told in his gait. It was no longer an easy swinging trot, but an agitated jerky swiftness that sapped his wind and forced him to slow down unconsciously to recover, only to have him discover his diminished speed and hasten to make it up again. He hurried down another hill, through another valley, mounted another rise, along a ridge a moment, and then down into a valley again. Hill, valley, hill and valley; spruces and poplar; spruces, poplar. Hill and valley—— an endless repetition. Not even the lonely track of a coyote on the snow's surface to give him a link with some living, moving creature like himself, for the storm had not subsided and the wild things kept to their dens.

The light was beginning to fade, he noticed some time later. Anxiously he scanned the country from a high hill, trying to locate some familiar landmark to guide him. But the thick snow prevented him seeing beyond the dark blur of the next spruce-clad hill. He mouthed a curse and sped down into the valley and on again.

Darker. He glanced at his watch, after struggling against the temptation. It was nearly five o'clock! And just as he made the alarming discovery, he came out of a spruce grove and saw the winding white path of the creek.

Weaver stopped, his eyes wide. As he stared, he became aware of something else. The snow had hardened into fine sleet again. Over head the wind whined viciously. There was almost a triumphant note in its fierce song as it whipped up the fury of the storm. The man shivered.

Silently he turned back into the spruce grove and set about building a shelter. He tried to keep the thought back, but he knew—— Lost!

IV

NEXT morning, after a hungry, wakeful night, Weaver boiled another pot of water and sipped the tasteless stuff. When he had boiled his first pot, the night before, he had searched vainly in his knapsack for a few remains of his tea leaves. This morning, by the stronger light of day, he looked again. But his pack was empty. He was forced to gulp down the water alone, though it did not appeal to his shrinking stomach.

He considered what he should do.

"Well, the first thing is to find out my directions," he mused.

It was still snowing, though lightly. Weaver knew how to find his compass points, even in a snow storm. He took his knife, placed the point on the edge

of his thumb nail and turned slowly in a circle. The sun always casts a shadow, even through the darkest clouds, and Weaver finally managed to make out a faint blur on his nail when he faced a certain direction.

"It's half past eight," he looked at his watch. "That means the sun'll be just about southeast by east at this time."

His direction found, he sketched a crude compass in the snow and reasoned out his plan of action.

"Guess I must've come too far south," he pondered. "This creek branch here'll likely be the south branch. So the thing to do is strike back north, veerin' towards the east, an' that ought to land me somewhere near home before long."

He packed his belongings, shouldered the knapsack and hurried away. Again the monotonous hills and valleys; spruces, poplars. Again the anxious climbing of the higher ridges, seeking to see some tree or hill or sign that would direct him to his cabin.

The snow settled down to a steady thick fall, forming a dense curtain all around him. Weaver tightened his belt and tried to forget his hunger. His eyes sought to pierce through the scudding flakes to find a landmark. Occasionally he thought he recognized some hill, or clump of trees, only to have the disappointment of proving himself wrong. After a few such disappointments, he tried to keep himself from being hopeful at the sight of a familiar looking tree or formation that loomed up unreal and ghostly through the flying snow.

For a long time he had wanted to look at his watch, too, and had forced himself to keep from doing it to keep from giving himself a start. But at length, when he stopped to rest himself in the shelter of a grove, he slowly pulled back his coat sleeve and laid bare the dial.

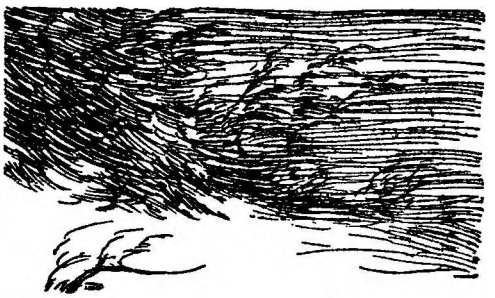
"Quarter past one!" he cried. "By Gee! I've been travelin' nearly five hours! No wonder I feel sort of weak on my pins, what with no grub inside me an' this soft snow makin' snowshoe trekkin' so tough."

Weaver slipped the pack straps off his shoulders willingly, sitting down on the knapsack a moment before rousing himself to build a fire. His fingers were stiff with cold, and awkward, but finally the blaze was going and glowing warmly beneath his hands.

"Maybe I better boil a pot of water again," he muttered. "It don't taste so good, an' I figure it don't satisfy my stomach none, but I guess maybe it heats me up a little." He pulled out the pot and packed it tight with snow. "Anyway," he bolstered his courage as he waited for the snow to melt. "I'll be at the shack soon, now, an' I'll get me a real feed, then."

He glanced fearfully at the fast falling snow as he said it, and somehow, his words lacked even the conviction of hope. The snow melted and the water came slowly to the boil, smoking gently. Weaver took the pot in his mittened hands and drank from it listlessly.

As he went wearily on his way again,



after taking his directions and striding out at an angle from his other trail, Weaver was more and more conscious of the gnawing ache of his stomach. He tried to think of some way to appease it. Game was out of the question, with his rifle at the shack and the wild things denning during the storm's duration. What else was there? He had once heard that the Indians chew the inner bark of the poplar, to allay the pangs of hunger. On the thought, he stopped and shaved the outer bark off a sapling and filled his mouth with the pale

green inside skin. But it was hardly in his mouth before he was spitting it out again.

"Bitter stuff," he grunted, without giving it a chance. "I'd just as soon do without as have that taste in my mouth."

HE MOVED on, sullen and morose, his shoulders sagging more and more under the oppressive weight of the pack on his back. His legs moved more slowly, too, and his feet seemed to have difficulty clearing the surface, so that his snowshoe webs always had a coating of snow on them that made them heavier than ever. Now and then, his eyes sought to remember some patch or form of country ahead, but after a little they stopped questing for landmarks, discouraged. The snow sifted down more densely than ever, shutting the man in with his solitary thoughts.

It must have been an hour later, when he was suddenly snapped out of his lethargy. He found the creek before him again.

"Darn!" he mumbled, in his first daze. Then he cursed, hiding his fear under the words.

But in the end, he had to admit his thoughts.

"I'm—I—— Well, I wonder where I am, anyway!" he said despairingly. "Might be a dozen creeks in this country, for all I know. Or maybe—— Well, I might be going in circles, like they say lost people do—— But I ain't!" he denied it fearfully. "No, I ain't lost! It's only —— Well, it's this snow an' this storm. They're keepin' me from gettin' home ——"

And then the other thought came again. Nature's henchmen were fighting him! Fighting him, and beating him.

He fell silent, musing on it, his face dark. Then he lurched abruptly away from the creek.

"I ain't travelin' in circles, anyway," he consoled himself, after a little. "Else I'd ha' seen my tracks on that creek. So maybe it's not the one I come from, after all."

But even as he hesitated, to figure out a new idea of direction, the falling snow reminded him that at that very moment his tracks were being filled in. Since morning, inches had fallen, and with the wind to help it drift, his trail would be entirely blotted out.

Weaver tried to shove the thought from him, plunging on in the direction he had chosen with a momentary burst of trotting. But his breath jerked in and out of his chest in tearing gasps, and his legs seemed far away, pulling him down. In a minute's time he was forced to stop and rest. Then he moved on at a walk, slowly.

On over the hill, across the valley, and up another slope. On and on. Watching with dull eyes the dark spruces looming out of the white mist and choosing a clear path between them. And feeling the slopes, rather than seeing them, and throwing his weight forward and struggling up, then easing himself slowly down the far side. On and on. And the country—— What could a man see, in that dense snow? But he was sure, he kept telling himself, sure that he was heading for his shack. Sure. But still the trees, the hills, the valleys roused no spark of memory in him. Still it was all unknown country. On and on. He must be getting near the cabin, he told himself. He must; must!

Darkness came, and he still walked on, eyes probing the shadows in front and seeking the squat outline of his shack. But the sting of the night wind, and the numb tiredness of his legs at length forced him to stop. He lurched into a nearby spruce grove, dropped the pack from his hunched shoulders and painfully stooped to scrape away the snow.

V

HE SPENT a sleepless night curled up under his blankets in the lee of a couple of little spruces his strengthless hands had been forced to chop down. It

was bitingly cold. And the fire was out all the night, too, because he had been too tired and too weak to bother bringing in enough fire wood to last him. So he lay in the thin shelter of his blankets, shivering, dozing fitfully, but always waking to hear the wind whispering fiendishly overhead.

"The strong an' the weak," he once roused himself to think it out. "Yes, sir; the strong an' the weak. Me, I said so myself, right after hearin' that radio feller talk. I said I was one of the strong. An'—— Now look at me. The strong against the weak. An' all of Nature's henchmen—all of 'em fightin' each other! Crazy stuff, sort of. Crazy, but—— That wind, now, an 'the storm it's drivin' along, an' this cold, an'—— Crazy, maybe, but it's real! Me, I'm fightin', an' I'm fightin' hard—— Oh, if I reach my shack, I'd be all right in ten minutes!"

He refused to think about the alternative.

The day was a repetition of the one before.

He got up, packed his belongings, and then dully pulled out his knife and placed the point on his thumb nail, pivoting slowly. When he found his direction he shook his head, despairingly, over the hard process of thought.

"I gues—— Golly, I don't know!" He tried again to puzzle it out, facing in the direction of the sun. "What'd I do yesterday? Seems to me—— Well, I was wrong, near as I can 'member. An' t'day, I can't just seem to figger—— Oh, it don't much matter! I'll just go that way there an' see what happens!"

He struggled into his snowshoes and trudged wearily away. It was cold. The wind was singing its wild song in the spruces again, howling madly across the clearings with its burden of sleet.

After he had been walking a while, the cold revived his senses a little.

"You didn't boil no water," he suddenly scolded himself. "You didn't even light a fire. Better do that, just to get warmed up. If you don't, you might freeze."

So he forced himself to kindle a blaze, and when it was alight, he piled on great logs and sat close as he dared and soaked in the heat. And he drank a pot of hot water almost gladly. Then he moved on with more eagerness.

BUT the stimulus of the comforting fire was soon forgotten in the fierce bite of the blizzard. Soon he was stumbling along, head down, utterly oblivious to his surroundings. On. Over the hills, across the valleys. On. Watching his snowshoes. Watching the webbing appear as he pushed one foot forward, and then seeing it go from sight as it sank in the snow. Then the web of the other shoe would show, as he carried it forward. Then it would be covered with snow, too, and his eyes would shift to the other shoe. Now and then, he would spare a glance from the shoes to see if his cabin was in sight yet. Then he would return to watching them.

And so he trudged on, step after step. When night came, he was walking in the same manner, slowly. But walking, all the same. Moving. And when his eyes could not see the webs he looked up, to find that darkness had come. He peered uncertainly around for a moment, seeking to see the outline of his cabin. But instead, his mind cleared and he realized that the wind had gone and that it was warm, and big fluffy flakes of snow scurried in white blankets down from the blackness above.

He stood still a moment, considering his discovery slowly.

"Well—— Guess I won't—bother—lightin' a fire," he said, and edged wearily into a thicket.

VI

WHEN it was light again, Weaver opened his eyes. He rose unsteadily, staring around him vaguely. Thinking

was hard. But finally he remembered. He was looking for his cabin. Somehow, his cabin had got lost. That was it. On the thought, he worked his feet into the snowshoe thongs and shambled away.

Sometime later, his head partially cleared by the cold of the wind, he recalled that he had not taken time to roll up his blankets. The thought bothered him for a moment.

"Must be somethin' wrong with me," he mumbled, resentfully. "Me, I ain't the kind to go forgettin', like that. Them blankets cost me money. Yes, sir; they did. An' I went an' left them an' my axe an' my pack-sack an' all. Me, I must be crazy."

He hesitated, wondering what he should do. Should he return for them? The wind howled overhead; he thought of it, and found that he would be walking into the bite of it if he retraced his steps. Walking was so hard and tiresome and painful, anyway.

No, he would not bother. He would go on, instead. Where? Anywhere. It did not matter. So Weaver trudged on, his feet lagging more and more.

Later, his senses came back and he cursed himself for a fool. The blankets —— He turned to go back for them, but found that even in the moment he had stopped the wind had all but filled in his near tracks. The rest would be completely covered. So going back was useless.

Where was he?

"I'm lost, that's where I am," he told himself grimly. "An' there's no use spoofin' 'bout it. Take your directions an' head south. Maybe——"

He pulled out his knife and found the faint shadow of the sun on his thumb nail. And in some wonder, he stared at his hand. The finger ends were blackened, unfeeling with frost-bite. The other hand was the same when he pulled off his mitten. And his face, he found, had no feeling in spots that he touched. He applied snow, swearing. As he rubbed it on with a small show of vigor, he felt the skin tingling under the treatment as the blood seeped into the frozen patches.

"Must be near noon, or more," he decided, after he had finished this.

He pulled back his coat sleeve to consult his watch. But he had forgotten to wind it the night before, and its hands were stopped.

Silently he moved on in the direction he had decided on. He snapped off a few poplar twigs as he trudged, and rammed them into his mouth to chew on. One of the brittle twigs pierced the skin of his cheek and blood came. He felt it trickling down. For a moment, wild thoughts panicked him.

Then he stumbled forward again, sullen at himself. And soon the numbness was on his brain once more and he did not care. Again he watched his snowshoes, moving with effort at the end of his legs. Those were his legs, he decided. He could not feel them move. But somehow he was moving. It did not matter where he was going, now. His path was an irregular zigzag, aimless and insane. But it did not matter. Here was a hill. He would climb it. Half way up, the fiercer sweep of the wind turned him back. It did not matter. He proceeded along the valley until another slope confronted him. Forgetting about the wind this time, he climbed it. At the top, the discomfort of the blizzard made him cower like an imbecile child. He blundered back down again, on his own trail. The snow had stopped, he found. The wind was drifting the clearings into crust. It pleased him, for the webbing on his shoes showed up better, without always sinking from

sight under a fluffy white blanket. He trudged on, selecting hard drifts. Twice, he fell. But he got up, shortly, and struggled on, angry at himself with an unreasoning and vague anger.

That night, Weaver shivered in a tiny cave made by the overhanging banks of a creek. Sometimes he slept, curled up like a dog. But there were things that troubled him. Odd pictures. Of a man walking. And of some unseen monster that kept trying to hurt the man. And he woke up, too, and he heard the wind calling to him in a mocking voice.

He got very angry. The storm was trying to tell him that it was the strongest. It made him swear to find that the wind could sweep away his voice so easily. But he knew, in himself, that he was the stronger. So he stood up in the tiny cave and shook his fists and yelled as loud as he could.

"I'm strong! I'm strong!" he shouted till his throat ached. "You're weak! You're weak!"

"Weak! Weak! Weak!" taunted the wind.

Weaver stamped up and down the cramped cave, waving his arms and hurling back challenges. And although he did not know it, this insane carry on kept him from freezing, for the blizzard was spending its last furious hours in a fierce show of might.

VII

MORNING found him red eyed, gaunt, but very determined. He stepped out of the cave expecting to find a great monster waiting for him. A monster who had been taunting him and goading him all night long, and whom he was going to fight, now. But instead, he saw a swirling white snow-storm, and a dark spruce bending under the weight of its white covering, and a haze of dim objects beyond.

So without bothering to think how it came there, for thinking was hard, he set off from the cave. But on the third step, sinking to his knees and beyond, he stumbled back to the cave. He must have his snowshoes.

It took him a long time to get the thongs adjusted on his clumsy feet, but finally the task was accomplished. And he set out, vastly pleased with himself. Now he could watch the webs.

After a long while, or what seemed a long while to him, he wondered where his snowshoes were taking him. The thought puzzled him for some time. Then he recalled a dim memory. Something about a cabin. A shack. Home. What was it, anyway? Somehow he knew that he should know, but he could not place it at all.

And then, the monster returned.

It laughed in his ears, amused at him for not knowing.

But he knew something, anyway. He knew something about the cold and the wind and the storm and the snow and—— Everything, it seemed. He knew everything was serving Nature. Nature's henchmen. And they were all fighting him. And fighting each other. And fighting and fighting and fighting. The wind and the snow. Why—— The wind and the snow were fighting, too. The wind would not let the snow go where it wanted. It kept stirring it up, carrying it to other places. The snow poured down, faster and faster, trying to fill up the places where it wanted to rest. Everything—everything—— Fighting! Fighting!

His monster laughed in his ears, again.

"Henchmen! Henchmen!" it shrieked. "The weak must go! The strong alone can live! The weak must go! Henchmen!"

"I'm strong!" he babbled. "I'm strong!"

"You're weak!" said the monster. "You're weak!"

"I'm strong!" he yelled.

And he cried. For the monster would not believe him.

"You were strong," said the monster,

and strangely enough, it seemed to soften its voice a little. "You were strong, but you lost your strength. Now you are weak. And the weak must die!"

The monster's voice grew stronger, saying that. And so Weaver cried again. The snow was tingling his face. He—— He had fallen.

"You're weak! You're weak!" laughed the monster.

He struggled grimly to his feet.

"I'm strong!" he panted.

He trudged on. But he fell again. And again. He was always falling, it seemed. And always, the monster came and goaded him about his weakness. And always he managed to get up and go on.

But—— There came a time when he did not get up. And the monster—— The monster had gone.

Weaver knew, then, that this was the end of him. His head cleared, and he lay there thinking about it.

"I've tried," he thought. "I did what I could. But I guess them other henchmen were the strongest, after all!"

The thought did not scare him. He was too tired, too ready for the end. But as he waited, he felt something hard digging into his side. It bothered him a little. He was quite comfortable, but for that one thing. He tried to figure out what it might be. Then it came to him. It was his metal match box in his front pocket.

Only his match box. Good. He waited.

Then he thought, suddenly, that he would like to feel the comforting glow of a fire before the end. If he could just hold his hands over the flames and feel the heat seep through, warming him just once more, before——

He could die happy, if he had a fire!

Weaver struggled around and managed to sit up. He waited a moment, and struggled again. He was on his feet, now. And there was a dead spruce, near. He could see it quite plainly. The snow had stopped, his mind told him, and he was surprised at the relief he felt over this. Weaver tottered towards the spruce.

He fell, once, on the way. But after a few minutes, he was on his feet again. Finally he reached the spruce. He fell again as he worked to kick away some of the snow for a fire site. And he lay there, quite still, for a long moment. But he was just conserving his strength. He knew he could do it.

THEN he had broken off some of the brittle branches, and placed them where he wanted the fire. His hands were clumsy, but he managed to break the branches into smaller pieces. These he sloped together in the form of a little teepee.

He was ready for the matches.

He stripped a mitten off one hand and pulled out the box. It would be better, he decided, if he took all the matches and held them all together with their heads the one way, and lit them in a bunch and shoved them under the waiting spruce twigs. He felt that he could not hold one match steady enough.

So he struck them all. The fire caught. He piled on more spruce. And he rose and broke off more branches, and the fire crackled strongly and the flames shot high, and Weaver sat in front, soaking in the fine comfort and goodness of it.

Then he looked up. A few feet away, dangling above the snow where he had hidden a large No. 3 trap, was the dead rabbit set he had made for lynx, six days before!

Food!

The sun struggled through the last retreating clouds of the storm.

Weaver knew, as he made for the food, that he was still one of the strong henchmen.

The Story Tellers' Circle

White Water Breed

HARRY SINCLAIR DRAGO wonders why the Great Lakes country has been so neglected by authors, and when you have read his *"White Water Breed,"* the lead-off story in this issue, you will wonder, too. It is largely the story of Polean La Flamme, timber beast, river pig, bull o' the woods, and a man with a heart as big as his muscles, a man whose roughneck ways and tremendous blustering voice kept most people from looking deeper to discover his fine sense of honor and unflagging loyalty.

Mr. Drago, as the following letter indicates, has drawn La Flamme, and the other interesting characters in his absorbing story, from life:

"In back of me, on my father's side, there are three or four generations of French Canadians. I was born on the Great Lakes. When I was still a boy, I was roaming the marshlands with rod and gun, and thoroughly unfitting myself for anything as prosaic as a business career.

"The passing years have not dimmed my enthusiasm or affection for the humble *habitant* friends of my boyhood. A fierce love of the soil beats in their breast. That quality alone would endear them to me.

"Nights without number I have sat before a fire of blazing pine knots in their shanties and listened to the rising gale without—trees threshing madly with every fresh gust of wind; the sullen lake breaking white and running higher and higher across the sandy beach; and at irregular intervals, shrill and shivery, the mocking cry of the loon.

"Even today the skies never darken, I never feel the approach of a storm without being whisked back to those days that are gone forever. Hospitality? I have not found its equal even in the West. What they had was mine without the asking; what could be done for my comfort was done without thought of reward. Those of you who know them as I do will bear witness with me.

"The first feature I wrote for a newspaper was a fact story about the *habitant*. The editor said it was 'Okay.' I thought it was better than that; possibly it was, for presently I was earning more money. In the course of a few years, northern Michigan, the Upper Peninsula, Ontario, were familiar ground to me.

"You will find *'The White Water Breed'* a tale of high courage. For me it has simply been a case of calling up out of the past some old friends, all good men and true. Of one of them, 'Polean La Flamme, I trust you will say as Mac Monnies does, 'Here is a man!'

"Life has been working its kaleidoscope faster and faster of late. But the radio, airplane and the telephone have not greatly changed such places as Pointe Aux Barques.

"It seems strange that a region as large as the Great Lakes, so rich in story material, so historically important, so vital a part of our business structure, should

remain almost unknown in American fiction. I can't believe that in any other country would this be so. I should like to see it mean to us in song and story what the Rhine means to the Germans or the Volga to the Russians.

"Harry Sinclair Drago"

The Saxophone Salute

IN *THE SAXOPHONE SALUTE,* Leighton H. Blood was written the different Foreign Legion story that readers are always hoping for. One would hardly expect to find an American radio crooner in that hard-boiled outfit, nor would one connect a story of adventure with such a character. But the author, himself an ex-officer of the Legion, has made an unusual and exciting story from the combination.

Mr. Blood has been kind enough to accede to our request for a few words about himself and the Legion. He says:

"Magazine readers are always interested, it seems, in what kind of folks the writers are. Where they were born, educated, and what they have done. Perhaps it gives them some sort of a picture in their mind's eye of the man who may have given them a few minutes of enjoyment, a thrill or a mental journey to some distant land.

"I was born in Boston, raised in New Hampshire, attending a public and later a private school, and then Tufts College. Newspaper reporting in Boston and later in New York, first as cable editor of the United Press and later a rewrite man on *The Evening Sun.* Enlisted in the army at start of World War, after waiting a few weeks for a commission in the Air Service that finally caught up with me in 1919. Served first in the 37th Engineers, which was later to become the first tank battalion. Transferred in France from Heavy to Light tanks, to be exact, the 332nd Battalion, the first American light tanks.

"After the war returned to *The Sun,* later became a staff writer and associate editor of a monthly magazine. Was recalled to active duty as a reserve officer on the personal request of Secretary of War Dwight W. Davis for a series of investigations for the Adjutant General and the department.

"Later, through the Comte de Sartiges, then Chargé at the French Embassy in Washington, and with the written recommendation of Secretary Davis wangled my way into the French Foreign Legion, foreign officer corps.

"I was assigned direct, instead of passing through Sidi Bel Abbes, depot of the *Legion Etrangere,* by General Vidalon, commanding troops of occupation in Morocco, to the 4th Regiment, *Etrangere,* at Marrakesh, in the High Atlas. Lieut. Edgar G. Hamilton, another American of long service, was with that regiment, and Vidalon suggested I would like to be with a compatriot. (Hamilton was badly wounded September 9th of this year rescuing one of his men under fire and, as this is written, is in the military hospital at Casablanca.)

"So much 'bunk' has been written about the Legion that a fact or two might not be amiss. About thirty-five per cent of the officers are foreigners, who retain their nationality. Some come from the ranks, others are inducted at grade, after a recommendation of their own military establishments, such as Secretary or Minister of War. Of the enlisted men in the 4th Regiment, more than sixty per cent were German. The life is hard but worse on the officers than on the men, strange as that may seem. An officer, for instance, spends a year or more of complete isolation when he is at the front. The men, at least, can pal around. If you don't think that is tough try it for a year. Desertions are fewer than in the American Army and no particular pains are taken to apprehend those who go over the hill. Only the routine of sending out their descriptions.

"Later I was transferred to Oran, Algeria, which comes under Sidi Bel

Abbes. There the Legion maintains its *Petite Depot,* where all recruits and all discharges pass. While there, in 1928, during some disastrous floods, a battalion of cholera germs decided that I was splendid maneuver grounds. The result, hospitals. When it was over, or at least I could get about, I took indefinite leave and came home. Since than have been writing fiction and working on newspapers and for a press association in Washington, covering the Senate.

"In *'Saxophone Salute'* the character, Tricot, is a composite of two Legion officers. One a battalion commander of the 4th Regiment and the other a line captain in the 2nd. The enlisted men could be found in any Legion outfit."

Top Boy

THE Burmese oil-fields provide a new and interesting locale for adventure fiction, and Frank Knox Hockman, author of *Top Boy,* is qualified in every way to supply us with much good reading about that far country.

"This yarn," says Mr. Hockman, "was written in the nature of a feeler, to find out if the editors would welcome stories of the oil fields, and also to give the readers of SHORT STORIES some idea of the clash in nature that occurs between American trail breakers in other lands and the natives. This clash element is nowhere better shown than in Burma. Most of the drillers originally taken from the U. S. by the British East Indian Company and the Royal Dutch Schell Company were young men, nearly all of them being natives of Pennsylvania who were working in the Oklahoma and Texas oil fields. They had never been among any but their own kind, and when they got to Burma some side-splitting adventures befell them. I hope that some of those old timers read this yarn. They will enjoy it. And, after all, in the final analysis, isn't that the best motivation I can give for this story—that it may bring to me a decent slice of the world's bacon, and give a kick to those devil-may-care men of oil it portrays?"

Man of the North

THE other day someone suggested to us that a magazine to publish exclusively stories of the Northlands would have a large following, and we thought that it might, if James B. Hendryx' stories were consistently featured. Jim Hendryx, whose story, *Sand,* is in this number of SHORT STORIES, is unquestionably the outstanding creator of Northern stories writing today. Editors, readers, and Northern adventurers all are agreed on that. Even the Mounted Police, themselves, always very critical of fiction about their organi-

READERS' CHOICE COUPON

"Readers' Choice" Editor, SHORT STORIES:
Garden City, N. Y.

My choice of the stories in this number is as follows:

1_____ 3_____

2_____ 4_____

5_____

I do not like:

_____ Why?_____

NAME_____ ADDRESS_____

zation, vouch for and read Hendryx' Northerns. They are at once exciting and authentic.

Here is a letter typical of the many that we receive:

"This may or may not be of interest to you, but I have been a reader of your magazine for several years and have until now refrained from expressing my opinion on the many stories published in your magazine. However I feel that some word of commendation is due to Mr. James B. Hendryx for the wonderful stories, and characters portrayed in his stories.

"It just occurred to the writer that these stories, together with the characters used by Mr. Hendryx, would make a wonderful Talkie Picture and I am wondering why some scenario writer does not take advantage of Mr. Hendryx' work.

"A picture of this type would be very different from the old 'Blood and Thunder' stuff or gangster type picture.

"Believe me when I say that 'Old Cush' and Black John Smith are two lovable characters and are unique in themselves. 'Black John' is particularly the best liar I have ever seen, characterized in a fiction story and I have never enjoyed a more lovable character than the old hypocrite as mentioned above.

"Anyone who did not sit up half the night getting a kick out of Mr. Hendryx' stories needs to have a mental examination by some responsible physician.

"Believe me when I say that I have traveled the U. S. A. and the entire Dominion of Canada and know something about the country of which Mr. Hendryx writes. It is with great pleasure that I sincerely ask you to print more of Mr. Hendryx' stories, because I feel sure that all of us who are so familiar with the great North and Northwest deeply appreciate his work.

"Edward G. Fraser."

Montreal, Canada

A Dose of Dinosaur

IN CHINA nothing is wasted. The people of the interior, not understanding the value of old things, often destroy priceless relics by converting them to their own uses. Because of this attitude, fossil bones of prehistoric animals are made into healing potions that are in wide demand among suffering natives. The bones are pulverized and fried with oil in a skillet. Less frequently, they are mixed with sour wine. The doses are recommended for liver and heart disorders and for nervous diseases. This strange industry has been in operation for centuries, and many coolies are engaged in the mining, grinding and selling of the doses of dinosaur.

The Next Issue

THE Forty-niners rushing to California; their grandsons rushing to the Klondike strike—and Gold the everlasting lure. A picture painted in *"Raw Gold"* James B. Hendryx's great novel which starts in our next issue. Hendryx has written of some of the greatest characters which have grown in the pages of SHORT STORIES and his name on a Northern story makes sure that it is a top-notcher. So don't miss the next number and Part I of *"Raw Gold."*

There are other feature stories to come in the issue. *"Murder in the Air"* a long novelette of flying and of mystery; a "Major" novelette by L. Patrick Greene wherein the "Major" tackles his enemies *"Barehanded";* a novel-length story of a stray man who runs into a bunch of cattle thieves—to their sorrow. It is *"Stray Man"* and is by Bennett Foster. *"The Hard Case"* a short and powerful sea story by Albert Richard Wetjen as well as other yarns of places from the coast of Nigeria to the harbors of Malaysia. All in all, an issue not to be missed.

OUTLANDS AND AIRWAYS

Strange facts about far places and perilous air trails. Send in yours.

A Grinning Fish

THE streams of northern Paraguay are the habitat of an interesting fish called the "piranha." It is a small fish, only six or eight inches in length, built much like a sunperch. Its jaws are armed with a most extraordinary set of teeth, keenly sharp, which mesh like the teeth of a steel trap. They mesh in such a way as to give the creature's mouth the effect of a fixed grin.

The fish are found in immense quantities and are ravenous for blood. If a wounded animal or person falls in the water, they appear in great swarms and in a few moments leave nothing but a skeleton.

Often they leap clear of the water, and one can hear their teeth clash thirty feet away. When caught and pulled on deck, they squeal with rage like a cornered rat.

Bathing, naturally, is not a popular sport in Paraguay, and in some sections it is even unsafe to wash one's hands.

The Otter-Fishers of Ichang

ICHANG, China, is on the Yangtze River, just one thousand miles from the sea. It is located in the shadow of the great central mountain range which crosses China from Siam to Amur. The neighborhood is rich in cave shrines and temples, both Taoist and Buddhist, and in continuation of an ancient legend, a colony of Taoist otter-fishers live on the river bank near a temple called An-an. The novel method of catching fish with trained otters has been practiced exclusively by this little colony for centuries. The fisherman rows out and casts his huge circular net upon the water, and as it sinks, the otter slips down the central cord and brings up any imprisoned fish.

New Indian Service

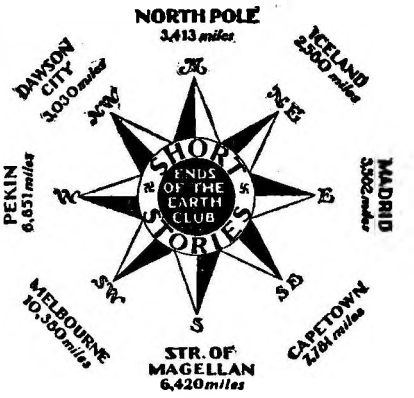
A COMPANY is being formed which will establish a new airway across India. The service will supersede the present arrangement whereby the Delhi Flying Club has carried air mail between Delhi and Karachi.

The new company's machines will fly by the shortest possible route from Karachi to Moghal Sarai, a short night's journey from Calcutta, where the mail will be transferred to the railway train for Calcutta. In default of facilities for night flying this arrangement will provide for as early a delivery in Calcutta as would be possible if the mail were carried the whole way by air. The mail for Delhi and other stations now served from there will be dropped at Agra.

Manila Goes Air-Minded

APPLICATION has been made for a permit to establish a regular Manila-Iloilo service, twice weekly, and an Iloilo-Negros service daily. The Spanish community, fired by the success of Fernando Rein y Loring in flying from Spain and the simultaneous arrival of Captain Ignacio Jiménez, even more famous Spanish aviator, has organized the society of the Albatross and purchased a large amphibian for business use.

THE ENDS OF THE EARTH CLUB



HERE is a free and easy meeting place for the brotherhood of adventurers. To be one of us, all you have to do is register your name and address with the Secretary, Ends-of-the-Earth Club, % Short Stories, Garden City, N. Y. Your handsome membership-identification card will be sent you at once. There are no dues—no obligations.

We'll bet Mrs. Ownby will be swamped with letters. Everyone wants to hear first hand about Hollywood.

Dear Secretary:

I received my membership card, and am I proud?

My husband, who was fatally injured in an auto accident last year, was technical director at one of the large studios here and we were sent to many places on location, so I can tell all about the studios and picture making. We were in Rome with the company during the filming of "Ben Hur" and toured Europe. Last year I visited the Hawaiian Islands.

I would like to hear from members in every part of the world and feel sure I can write interesting letters.

Yours for success,

Mrs. Gertrude E. Ownby

1722 Comstock Ave.,
West Los Angeles,
Calif.

It's a far cry from Switzerland to Brazil, but this member can write about both.

Dear Secretary:

This is to say that I have just been perusing SHORT STORIES, which I found exttemely interesting, as it contains the kind of stories I like best—with a kick in them. I naturally came across the Ends of the Earth Club part of such an attractive magazine, and it struck me as a very good idea for exchange of correspondence with people located in different parts of the world, which prompted me to write you these lines to ask you to be good enough to have me down for membership.

I have been in different countries of Europe, Switzerland being the one where I stayed longest. My experiences are such that I am prepared to write on many interesting subjects and if any of the club members should care to correspond with me, I shall be only too glad to answer their letters.

Yours truly,

Otto Stroeter

Caixa Postal No. 3058,
Sao Paulo,
Brazil,
South America

Another stamp collector joins the Club.

Dear Secretary:

I am writing in regard to an enrollment in the Ends of the Earth Club. In a copy of SHORT STORIES that I got a few days ago, I saw your article about this club, and became very much impressed with the idea of it, so thought I would like to become a member.

I have traveled quite a bit in the past few years and have visited quite a few countries, but now my wandering days are over, but still I like to write and discuss them.

In my travels I have seen quite a bit of

the good old U. S. A., Cuba, Panama, the Hawaiian Islands, Guam, the Philippines, some South Sea Islands, and have visited most of the important sea ports along the coast of China. I spent about three years in the Philippines and China so had a chance to see a few interesting sights, being in China at the beginning of their trouble with Japan.

I would be glad to correspond and answer any questions about these countries to anybody who might be interested, and in return would like to hear from people who have traveled Europe, South America, or Africa.

I am also a stamp collector and a much interested one, so would like to hear from some people with whom I might exchange stamps.

Yours truly,
Frank A. Arsenault

59 Huron Avenue,
Cambridge,
Massachusetts

Try again, pen pals.

Dear Secretary:

I am a member of the Ends of the Earth Club and a reader of SHORT STORIES which I read with pleasure.

When I was made a member of the club my address was 25 Bis Rue Ch. Infrot, Meudon Val Fleury near Paris, and somehow there was a mistake for most of the letters reached me addressed to Manton Val Fleury which is in the south of France. Several letters went down there and got to Meudon all right, but I am afraid a good many never reached me. The whole thing got more complicated owing to the fact that I went to Belgium and then to England so that lots of my letters followed me, reaching me months late and some not at all.

I wish to apologize to pen pals who may have written me and never got an answer. I am sorry if there are any, but the whole thing is most unfortunate.

I enjoy writing to pen pals very much but may I add that I am twenty-two and like sports very much. I therefore wish very much to know as much as possible about life, hobbies and doings of the young generation in the United States. This is not to offend anybody, but I really don't like discussing politics too much.

Yours from over the ocean,
J. D. Libert

12 Villa D'Orleans,
Neuilly-sur-Seine,
near Paris, France

Every state has its own individuality and special points of interest for the open minded. Here's a man who can write about every state east of the Mississippi.

Dear Secretary:

As I am thinking of going to Texas, Arizona, Oklahoma or New Mexico next winter, I would like to correspond with persons in any of these states. Of course I will be glad to hear from other states also.

Five years ago a friend and myself took a trip over the Eastern portion of the United States, going as far south as Florida City and as far west as New Orleans and Blytheville, Arkansas. So I can give some information on any state east of the Mississippi in exchange.

I am particularly interested in canning factories, and would be glad to hear from anyone in a locality with a canning factory of any kind.

At present I am bonded agent for a warehouse company.

Sincerely yours,
Larry Reisinger

3 Washington St.,
Wayland, N. Y.

Who wants to make a trip to New Zealand?

Dear Secretary:

I have been a silent reader of your wonderful magazine, and now I am taking the

liberty of writing you this letter. Your magazine is the greatest published and please keep up the good work. But don't forget to make me a member of your club for life.

I have traveled extensively throughout the entire United States. After finishing two years of college, the wanderlust took its hold on me and at present I am at Langley Field, Virginia, in Uncle Sam's Air Corps. My enlistment will be up in June, 1933, and that brings me to the subject of this letter.

As soon as that date arrives I am contemplating a trip to New Zealand, and also a tour of Europe. I have relatives in Europe and great friends in New Zealand. My question is, is there anyone who would care or even thinks he would care to make this trip with me? I don't profess to be wealthy, but I am experienced in the ways of the world.

I am an accomplished musician, well versed on the piano and pipe organ. I have held positions in some of the largest theatres in New York, and Philadelphia.

I do sincerely hope that you will publish this letter as it would help me immensely to have a reader of SHORT STORIES as my accomplice. And please keep up the good work.

Thanking you, I remain,

Jimmie Dale

c/o Albert Hoile,
36th Pursuit Squadron,
Langley Field,
Virginia

A sailor's son with a yen for more traveling.

Dear Secretary:

I would like to apply for membership in the Ends of the Earth Club.

I haven't done much real traveling, but I have been on automobile trips to Oconomowoc, Wisconsin; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Canada, Niagara Falls, and then when my father was in the Navy I lived in Portsmouth, Virginia, Charleston, South Carolina, and Washington, District of Columbia. I hope in the future, when I get a chance (and some money) to extend my travels to foreign countries. I have also been to Scotts Bluff, Nebraska, and the border of Colorado. All the traveling I do now is done through books.

I have read your magazine for many years and think it is the best of its kind on the stands. I noticed a friend of mine in a list of some of your members so I decided to sign up too.

Yours,

Kenneth Walter Breen

91-12 Gold Street
Ozone Park,
Long Island

The Ends of the Earth Club has made a regular* SHORT STORIES *reader of this man.

Dear Secretary:

For many years I have been an irregular reader of SHORT STORIES and it has been only recently that I have been a more regular reader, due to your department. I have taken quite a few names from those that write to you and have written to them. I have a hobby of stamp collecting and get quite a kick out of writing to pen pals in foreign countries. I haven't done any traveling myself.

The following is a list of countries that I would like to send letters to and to receive a reply: Belgian Congo, Nejd or Hejaz (Arabia), Persia, Turkey, Tasmania, Japan, Madagascar, Cape Town (South Africa), Chile, Argentina, Liberia, Egypt, Afghanistan, Siam, Borneo and Sumatra.

In conclusion I would like to become a member of your club and anxiously await your reply.

Yours very truly,

Harry V. Gerhardt

6529 Wheeler Street,
West Philadelphia,
Pennsylvania

SAVE THESE LISTS!

WITH hundreds of letters from new members coming in every day, it is obviously impossible to print all of them in the columns of the magazine. The editors do the best they can, but naturally most readers buy SHORT STORIES *because of the fiction that it contains. Below are more names and addresses of Ends of the Earth Club members. Most of these members will be eager to hear from you, should you care to correspond with them, and will be glad to reply. Save these lists, if you are interested in writing to other members. Names and addresses will appear only once.*

Zelda Radefeldt, Consort, Alberta, Canada
Austin J. Reardon, 848 North Waller Avenue, Chicago, Illinois
C. A. Redd, R. 5, Box 13, 8727-4th Avenue South, Roebeck Springs, Alabama
Charles E. Relchert, 523 North Buchanan Street, Edwardsville, Illinois
Larry Reisinger, 3 Washington Street, Wayland, New York
Herbert D. Richmond, Co. A, 29th Engineers, Ft. Schuyler, New York
Florence Rieder, 624 South California Avenue, Chicago, Illinois
John Ritz, 1101 Sherlock Avenue, Canton, Ohio
Lance Corporal D. Roberts, 2nd Bn., Royal Welch Fusiliers, North Front, Gibraltar, Spain
Mrs. Virginia Robertson, 4021 Locust Street, West Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
J. W. Robinson, c/o Cambridge Grove, Southcoats, Hull, England
Mabel Rogers, General Delivery, Baldwin, Long Island
John Rose, 384 Metacorn Avenue, East Warren, Rhode Island
Irving Rosenberg, 5169 Sunset Blvd., Los Angeles, California
Low K. Ross, 725 Central Avenue, Alameda, California
Mildred Rumsey, Box 368, Penn Yan, New York
Herbert J. Russell, Hdq. Battery, 13th F. E., Schofield Barracks, Territory of Hawaii
Jerome G. Saburnie, 2767 North Taylor Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Thomas W. H. Samuelson, c/o Mr. T. W. Belch, R. R. 1, Millbrook, Ontario, Canada
F. J. Sattur, USS Chester, c/o Postmaster, New York City
Angela Schips, 4012 Muriel Avenue, Cleveland, Ohio
Harry Schwartz, 1606 South Homan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois
Joseph C. Sedler, R 4, Box 19, Waukesha, Wisconsin
Dr. George B. Shattuck, c/o J. H. Johnston, Glen Cove, Long Island
Alex Shaw, 2350 Hudson Blvd., Jersey City, New Jersey
Jack S. Shirley, General Delivery, Hines, Oregon
Bradley P. Smith, 60 Adams Street, Battle Creek, Michigan
R. H. Snyder, Dreher Avenue, Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania
Margaret Soutar, 49 Annfield Road, Dundee, Scotland
Jane W. Soward, 2725 First Avenue, Huntington, West Virginia
Earl Staab, 245 Locust Street, Columbia, Pennsylvania
Sergeant C. M. Steele, Tripler General Hospital, Honolulu, Territory of Hawaii
Eda Stefani, Isleton, California
John Sterns, 1415-4th Street, Baker, Oregon
Ruel L. Stewart, 508 Hickory Street, St. Joseph, Missouri
W. A. Stewart, 317 Indian Road, Cres., Toronto, Ontario, Canada
Mack H. Stilwell, General Delivery, Charleston, South Carolina
Elwood Stockton, 2518 Montgomery Street, Louisville, Kentucky
Peter Stray, Co. G. 14th Infantry, Fort Davis, Canal Zone, Panama
Otto Stroetter, Caixa Postal 3058, Sao Paulo, Brazil, South America
Francis Sullivan, 165 Hansen Terrace, Collingdale, Pennsylvania
W. Rufus Sullivan, Mountain Grove, Missouri
J. L. Summar, 313 North Rusk Street, Amarillo, Texas
Merle Swarner, 2312 Braddock Avenue, Swissvale, Pennsylvania

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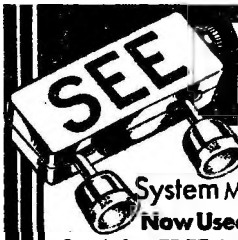

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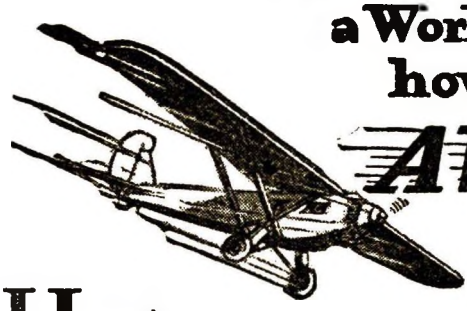

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